

TOWARDS FOSTERING A CULTURE OF UNITY AND COOPERATION AMONG
CHURCHES THAT LEADS TO PARTNERSHIPS IN SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

A THESIS-PROJECT

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DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

REFORD MOTT

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When a man's ways are pleasing to the LORD,
He makes even his enemies live at peace with him.

—*Proverbs 16:7*

If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, take others with you.

— *Source Unknown*

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PREFACE

The author's reason for writing about churches working together is twofold. The first has to do with a book the author read just a little over eighteen years ago entitled *That None Should Perish*, by Pastor Ed Silvano. The book was a detailed account of the Argentinian revival that had been going on for well over a decade. In it, Silvano gave a glowing account of many miraculous conversions and explosive church growth and the remarkable impact these had on major cities in Argentina. The book captivated the author and left him with a deep desire to see God move in a similar way in his city and region.

During the author's first year in seminary, he came across George Otis's video series called *Transformations*. Like Ed Silvano's book, Otis's video series also gave a detailed account of what God was doing in different cities around the world. Particularly intriguing was the miraculous turnaround of Medellin, Colombia noted in the series. Previously Medellin was known as the murder capital of the world, but God had come to that city in a powerful way and the result of it was a miraculous transformation, making Medellin one of the safest places to be in Colombia today.

Most notable about these transformational moves of God was the catalytic role that prayer played, both in sparking and sustaining them. The conscious decision of the Medellin pastors to lay aside their differences and come together for the peace of the city of Medellin was personally moving and deeply transformative. And, by this time, the fire that had been lit some years prior by Ed Silvano's book was now fanned into full flame.

By January 2000, that fire sparked the initial effort to engage other pastors in the city with the proposition to pray together once a month. At that time the city of Mount Vernon had enough crime and corruption to warrant risking the rejection of pastors who were either too paranoid or just indifferent to the idea. To be sure, it was a learning experience - one that, thankfully, has been more rewarding than disappointing. While there has yet to be a move of God rivaling Medellin Colombia in that city or region, the relationships formed over the years have made those meager efforts worthwhile.

Today, the author is even more deeply entrenched in the enterprise of networking with pastors. The author is privileged to play integral roles on a few strategic partnership initiatives, both locally and internationally, all the while driven by the anticipation that what happened in Medellin could one day happen in his region. There is yet a second reason for choosing this thesis topic as a course of study. The desire to see God move in a transformative way, coupled with the increased demands working with pastors, have made it an absolute necessity to increase learning in this critical area of ministry. Hitherto the author's learning has mostly come from hands-on experience in ministry. And while experiential learning has great value, what lies beyond one's learning horizon can best be acquired from the experience of others.

As the reader may or may not discern, some of the assumptions that are brought to this thesis-project have been informed by personal experiences. However, the author's anticipation was that this entire process, from the theological framework to the research methodology, would stretch him, leaving him better equipped with the skills necessary to meet the demands of effective partnership building. Hopefully those who read this paper will in some way be inspired and equipped to serve the body of Christ as well.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of my thesis-project would not have been possible without my family. First and foremost I acknowledge my wife and best friend Sherrie, whose unwavering support throughout this journey has been huge. I applaud her willingness to put up with my frequent but necessary trips to my quiet place in the mountains to sort things out. For the past twenty-eight years, she has been my rock. And thanks to her gentle prodding, I was able to push through my challenges with anxiety and finish my course. I also acknowledge my children Tenneil, Terrance, Tanya, Josiah, and Elizabeth, who, despite being fully grown, still think I am the smartest daddy in the world. My efforts to disabuse them of these childish notions have been to no avail. Their belief in me is a constant source of strength on a daily basis.

I also wish to acknowledge my second family, the leadership team of Family Christian Center. Each of you has played a role in helping me get to the finish line by stepping up to the plate and serving with joy, regardless of what was asked of you. Thank you for taking my finishing this journey personally. Elder Mike Cotto, my faithful son in the Lord - you carried the mantle of prayer. And so many others of you showed your faithfulness in so many ways. I cannot think of a better band of brothers and sisters to go through life with than you.

Thanks to my dear friend, Rev. Dr. Marcos Rivera who encouraged me to start this journey and go to seminary over a decade ago. He was able to discern in me abilities that I was unaware of. Throughout my journey, he has remained a constant source of encouragement and wisdom. A great man once told me that if you ever see a turtle sitting

on a fence pole, somebody helped him get there. Well, I am the turtle on the fence post and you would be that somebody. You will never know how much your friendship means to me.

Finally, I wish to express my deepest and most heartfelt gratitude to the teaching team at CUME. To Doug and Judy Hall, your easygoing approach to learning gave me the confidence to believe that I could actually do this. Your collective teaching spirit was like that of a nurturing mother who lives to inspire confidence in her children. To Dr. Eldin Villafane, you, like the father, made me realize that I was going to have to earn this degree. And to Dr. Bobby Bose who served as my first reader and supervisor: you were like the demanding coach who would not settle for a subpar effort. You made me reach deep inside for that little something extra—my best and nothing less. I hope you know how much you have blessed my life.

ABSTRACT

This thesis-project is a systemic study of church partnerships and how such partnerships can lead to social transformation. The overarching principle applied herein is what Dr. Eldin Villafane refers to as “the hermeneutical circle of social ethics.”¹ There are three basic steps within this particular paradigm, and each poses a basic question.

The first step is Clarification. This addresses the question: What is going on? This is addressed in chapter one at the stage where the author introduces the problem and context. It involves doing social analysis of the problem in order to better understand its relationship to an individual context. The second step is Conceptualization. This addresses the question: What does the Bible and other authoritative literature have to say about this? This is done in chapters two and three. It involves theological reflection on biblical sources, and on literature that inform the thesis in some way. The third and final step is Confrontation. This addresses the question: How do we respond? This is done in chapters four and five. It involves developing strategies that are consistent with a systemic view of reality that is informed by the previous two chapters.

The basic idea that this thesis advances is that Christ has many congregations but only one church, and churches should partner together in order to become more effective agents of God’s shalom. A copious amount of attention is invested in developing a biblical theology for unity and partnerships. Also, ministry practitioners are charged with the responsibility of stemming the existing culture of competition that pervades the church.

¹ Villafane Eldin. Presentation/ “Social Ethics”/ in the DMin course, Roxbury Mass, June 2012. (Accessed December 2015)

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction to the Ministry Problem and Its Setting

This thesis-project addresses the question: How is unity best fostered among churches in such a way that leads to kingdom partnerships for social transformation? The author begins with a set of assumptions based on how his personal experiences as a pastor have informed him. These assumptions are: (1) although there are many congregations, Christ has but one church in a given city. (2) Unity and cooperation among churches within a city or region is the key to releasing the full force of God's commanded blessings upon our cities. (3) Relationship building is an important, yet often overlooked, part of fostering unity. It may very well be the foundation. (4) It is up to pastors to take the lead in carrying out the mandate to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (5) We may never arrive at the place of doctrinal conformity; however, a proper definition and understanding of unity can create grounds for mutual acceptance—one that allows diversity to flourish within kingdom partnerships. The chapters that follow are an exploration of the broader themes that relate to this thesis-project.

Chapter one is a brief description of the problem and the context in which it is played out. In describing the problem, the author posits that the church is becoming increasingly irrelevant to society, mainly as a result of its own internal struggles. The author then shows the relationship of those struggles to his own pastoral context as he briefly describes the state of the city of New Rochelle, New York. Included is an outline

of some of the challenges pastors face when it comes to partnership and unity, and how the author proposes to find answers to the question of how best to forge collaboration.

Chapter two contains the theological framework for unity and partnership building. It is divided into two sections. The Old Testament section chronologically explores the development of the concept of partnerships, beginning with the Godhead and extending to Adam, God's first vice-regent and the father of all of humanity. The Old Testament section builds upon the Godhead's example of unity, proving that partnerships are to be the normal mode of operation for all human endeavors. The New Testament section is also a chronological exploration of key texts, which further develop the argument for church partnerships. The theology of the unity of the Church is the main focus of this section.

Chapter three contains the literature review, which grounds the scholarship of this project in its broader literary context. The purpose of the literature review is to get a better grasp of the subject and its related themes from the perspective of those who have already engaged it, while enriching the author's own vocabulary to better express the work that he does. Chapter three covers both the central thesis of this thesis-project, as well as the related themes.

To better understand the unity of the Church, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones' book, *The Basis of Christian Unity*, and John H. Armstrong's book, *Your Church is Too Small: Why Unity in Christ's Mission is Vital to the Future of the Church* were chosen. For a better grasp on living systems ministry and how the Church relates to the broader living system, which is the city, the author chose Douglas Hall's book, *The Cat and the Toaster: Living*

Systems Ministry in a Technological Age and Peter Senge's book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Business Organization*.

For pastoral leadership, Dr. Eldin Villafane's book, *A Prayer for the City: Further Reflections on Urban Ministry* provides a Latino perspective, which relates specifically to the author's social context. Finally, for kingdom partnerships, Matthew Dirks and Chris Bruno's inspired book *Churches Partnering Together: Biblical Strategies for Fellowship, Evangelism and Compassion* and the collaborative work of Ronald J. Sider, John Perkins, Al Tizon, and Wayne Gordon, *Linking Arms, Linking Lives: How Urban-Suburban Partnerships Can Transform Lives*, provide some practical understanding of how these kingdom partnerships can be done.

Chapter four provides a detailed description of the research methodology employed for the development of this thesis-project. Also included is a series of semi-structured interviews done with ministry practitioners who are involved with the task of partnership building, either locally or in a national and international context. Among these practitioners are Tony Fitzgerald, the current leader of Church of the Nations (COTN), an international ministry, with one of its resource centers based in Richmond, Virginia; Steve Fedyski, COO of Pureflix, a faith-based Entertainment Company, based in Phoenix, Arizona; and Dr. Nathan Culver, the current leader and founder of One Nation Network out of Atlanta, Georgia.

These interviews will explore: (1) how these leaders view the whole enterprise of church partnerships, (2) what place doctrinal agreement has in partnering together, and (3) some of the major hindrances to building partnerships. The point of these interviews

was to broaden the author's understanding of what the aforementioned requires to foster unity and build strong kingdom partnerships, regardless of the geographical context.

Additionally, there are two systems thinking methods that were used in this thesis-project: learning teams and the hexagon process. The learning team was a group of seven ministry practitioners who agreed to meet for one four-hour brainstorming session. As expected, many issues and insights came to light as a result of the hexagon process which inform the development of this thesis-project.

Chapter five is the results and evaluation along with the author's reflection upon the entire process of the development of this thesis-project and how the assumptions he brought to the thesis-project experience were either confirmed or corrected through what he has learned. Based on the author's conclusions, he provides some recommendations for the reader.

The Problem with Division

Jesus pointed out the destructive nature of disunity when he said, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand." (Matt 12:25)¹ Thus, isolation and division makes the Church weak and vulnerable to the powers of darkness that wage war continuously against it to render its witness ineffective. Hence, there is a pressing need for churches to learn to work together for the advancement of God's kingdom. Unless there is an atmosphere of unity and

¹ All scripture citations are taken from the New International Version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), unless otherwise noted.

cooperation among churches in a city or region, no kingdom partnerships can be formed to effectively address and affect social change.

Collaboration among churches is a critical issue, as we see the Church becoming increasingly marginalized within society, and those who claim no faith becoming the second largest demographic after evangelicals. More alarming, however, is the growing trend of people becoming de-churched -a demographic that is now referred to as “church refugees”. This trend simultaneously points to the need for the Church to reform itself as it addresses the eroding moral conditions of our society.

Both Hollywood and the secular media exploit every opportunity to paint a negative picture of the Church and present the Church as the cause for everything that is wrong in the world. While the media industry may not be the main culprits, the media’s ability to shape people’s perceptions about the Church or anything else should not be underestimated. That said, the Church must be willing to take a long hard look in the mirror and recognize that the Church is ultimately the cause of its own problems.

David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons echo these sentiments by pointing out that “we have to realize that if the enormous number of Christians in this country has not achieved the level of positive influence hoped for, it’s not the fault of a skeptical culture.”² Their book, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity*, looks at Christianity through the eyes of the un-churched, and it addresses six major points where they disagree with the Church’s stance. These negative perceptions naturally hinder the Church’s ability to reach the un-churched. The inability to reach the un-churched,

² David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 19.

coupled with the rise of the de-churched, all speak with resounding clarity to the fact of the Church's growing irrelevance.

Only a generation ago, people had high levels of trust in religious leaders and the Church generally had a good reputation. Today, those who have left the Church make up roughly 33 percent of the American population.³ According to Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope, in their book *Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People are Done with Church but Not Their Faith* "The two most important macro-level trends are undoubtedly the loss of trust in social institutions in general and religious leaders in particular and the perception that religious institutions are no longer tied into the daily life of individuals as intimately as they once were."⁴

Consequently, the Church is no longer seen as a relevant force in people's daily lives. This is despite the fact that people are still as deeply religious as before. They still desire to know God and to have religious experiences, but are moving away from the Church and religious institutions as the central mechanism for this activity. Packard and Hope went on to cite several reasons for the loss of relevance. One of their main reasons was the Church's preoccupation with its day-to-day survival. They say, "People view the church as inwardly focused and consumed by the politics of its own survival."⁵ How much blame for this can be laid at the feet of Hollywood or the liberal media? It is difficult to say.

³ Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope, *Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People are Done with Church but Not Their Faith* (Loveland: Group Publishing, 2015), 50, iBooks.

⁴ Packard and Hope, *Church Refugees*, 40.

⁵ Packard and Hope, *Church Refugees*, 45.

It is clear from Packard and Hope's comments, however, that a major culprit for this growing societal trend is the Church itself. Packard and Hope concludes that,

The de-churched movement is a strong leading indicator of the loss of relevance and diminished importance of the church in our society. If the church can't manage to retain its most committed, devoted, and energetic followers, then it's destined to become a greatly diminished force in the social landscape, at least in the immediate future.⁶

Packard and Hope are among many voices that have joined the throng of those pointing to this alarming trend. Kinnaman and Lyons, along with Drew Dyck's writer of *Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith. . . and How to Bring Them Back* and George Barna writer of *Churchless: Understanding Today's Unchurched and How to Connect with Them*, are just a few of the recent publications that offer some perspective on the growing trend of people leaving the Church, or those refusing to come to the Church.

Perhaps the number one complaint the author has personally heard from the un-churched, which stands as their reason for not attending Church or caring about Christianity, is that the Church is too divided. In their minds, division makes the Church seem weak and ineffective. One young man the author talked to on the streets, likened all the different church denominations to the gangs and their struggle to gain and control territory. Because of this notion, these street kids do not see the Church as being able to reach them in a relevant way.

The author vividly recall a conversation with the Mayor of the city of Mount Vernon a few years ago, in which the mayor lamented over the fact that there was so

⁶ Packard and Hope, *Church Refugees*, 48.

much crime in the city despite the fact that there were so many churches in the community. The problem, he pointed out, was that churches lacked the ability to organize themselves and do something about crime in the city. Instead, the drug dealers were dealing their drugs right in front of the churches, while church people worshipped God behind the safety of their closed doors. As a churchgoer himself, the Mayor seemed to grasp the spiritual implications of the unity of the church, or the lack thereof. In his estimation, if the Church could unite it would definitely have a positive impact on decreasing the crime in the city.

With this in mind, the Church leaders need to recognize its divine placement within its community and assume ownership for its prosperity. This idea of divine placement is clearly articulated by the prophet Jeremiah when he noted, “Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper (Jer 29:7). Captive Israel was charged with the responsibility of seeking the peace of the city in which they had been held captive and to work for its betterment. Interestingly, God attached the prosperity of his people to their willingness to work for the prosperity of the city.

This is ample motivation for church leaders to take ownership of their communities and work for its improvement. Filling these voids is also a way of gaining a place of leadership where the voice of the local church can help give direction and shape the direction of its city. This is the kind of servant leadership that Jesus taught and modeled (Mark 10:42-46).

Incidents like the DC-Baltimore riots only serve to remind pastors of the fact that God has assigned and authorized every congregation a place to serve within the community that no other agency on earth possesses. Jesus said: “I will give you the keys

of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (Matt 16:19) Hence, the Church literally has the power to prevent or permit whatever it desires within a given community.

Furthermore, this gets back to the issue of relevance. Had not the collective pastors in the DC-Baltimore area recognized that this power to bind and to loose applied appropriately to their immediate context, there is no telling how much more damage would have been done. But in coming together, they were able to collectively release God’s power over those city streets and bring an end to the riots - something even the police themselves were unable to do. John Dawson, in his book *Taking Our Cities for God: How to Break Spiritual Strongholds*, is spot on with his observation that, “if we are not using our biblical spiritual weapons, we are failing the people we are attempting to serve.”⁷

The author’s thesis-project sees an inextricable connection between a spirit of harmony among congregations and effective kingdom partnerships taking shape within a city. Further, the thesis-project advances the idea that only where unity exists among churches can there be a full release of God’s shalom upon our cities. Of course, all this is easier said than done. The problem of disunity in the Church is almost universal. And, while the author’s hope is to see his city and region become the exception to that rule, New Rochelle currently falls right in line with the rest of the nation. There is work to be done.

⁷ John Dawson, *Taking Our Cities for God: How to Break Spiritual Strongholds* (Lake Mary: Charisma House Publishing, 2001), 45.

Kingdom Partnerships

Jesus said, “By this will all men know that you are my disciples; if you love one another.” (John 13:35) This is a call to unity and cooperation, apart from which, the Church has no credible witness to the world. Furthermore, Jesus prayed “May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me,” (John 17: 21-23) affirming once again that it is through the instrumentality of unity that God’s love for the world is revealed.

Thus, effective kingdom partnerships are only possible when there is a spirit of unity and cooperation among churches within a city or region. Kingdom partnerships are the key to overcoming the overwhelming odds churches are sometimes confronted with when it comes to affecting change within the community. Chris Bruno, Matt Dirks and D. A. Carson, in their book *Churches Partnering Together: Biblical Strategies for Fellowship, Evangelism and Compassion*, provide some basis for understanding what a kingdom partnership is. They noted that, “A kingdom partnership is a gospel-driven relationship between interdependent local churches that pray, work, and share resources together strategically to glorify God through kingdom-advancing goals they could not accomplish alone.”⁸ The strategic sharing of resources to accomplish multiple goals is not a novel idea but one that is grounded in scripture. Strategic sharing of resources to accomplish multiple goals is an idea that will be further developed in chapter three.

⁸ Chris Bruno, Matt Dirks, and D. A. Carson, *Churches Partnering Together: Biblical Strategies for Fellowship, Evangelism and Compassion* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2014), Location 188, (Kindle edition).

Additionally, another aspect of kingdom partnerships is demonstrated when cooperation, trust, and a spirit of camaraderie remains among pastors even after a task is completed. There is no breaking of fellowship or disbanding. Rather, as with combat veterans or former athletes, there is still a common bond and a deepened sense of interdependence.

Ministry Context

The City of New Rochelle, where the author both lives and pastors his local church, has a population of approximately 79,446, as per US Census 2013.⁹ It is an ethnically and culturally diverse city that has a 27 percent Hispanic population among its growing diversity. Located just north of New York City in Lower Westchester County, New Rochelle is typical of most suburban cities. But for the most part, it is considered by many to be an upscale city, boasting among the highest income and the highest levels of education per capita in the state. It is home to many of the movers and shakers who ply their trade by day in nearby New York City, but who prefer to reside in a smaller suburban community.

As is typical of communities of this kind, New Rochelle has very few churches for a city of its size and population (forty-four at last count; forty-six if Mormon Temple and the Kingdom Hall are included). Several of those churches are mainline denominational churches that are mostly in decline. Of the four Roman Catholic

⁹ “Measuring America—People, Places, and Our Economy Census 2012 Census Bureau Researchers,” United States Census Bureau, accessed December 7, 2015, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/families/links/>.

churches, three are slated for closure by the Archdiocese, leaving only the Mother Church (Holy Family) to serve the declining Catholic population. With the exception of the Greek Orthodox and one Methodist Church, most of the churches are located in the lower income sections of the city, where the majority of attendees are from the poor and the middle class.

Shortly after relocating to New Rochelle in 1999, the author was invited to join the Interdenominational Pastors' Council of New Rochelle (IPC), organized by Reverend Martin Nelson. Up until that time the author had not been a part of any local pastors' network, so he treasured the opportunity to make some new friends and gain a better understanding of how things actually worked in his city. That meant, among other things, getting to know who the gatekeepers and powerbrokers were. The main agenda of the IPC was to meet monthly for an hour to discuss the city big event for the National Day of Prayer, held each year on the steps of City Hall. Outside of this event, there was not much else keeping the pastors together.

The experience did allow some insight to be gained into the whole enterprise of partnering with other churches. Needless to say, it quickly became apparent that this was no walk in the park. The challenges of getting pastors to cooperate for the event were more than we the pastors were able to overcome. The pastors tried, year in and year out, but it was just not possible to get the other pastors to be interested in the idea of simply linking arms for an hour to pray for the city. Nevertheless, the faithful few who gathered have continued undaunted for the past seven years. Not surprisingly, even the pastor of the Baptist Church where our meetings took place rarely attended the meetings.

Apparently some pastors could not see the value of investing time in building relationships with other pastors, given the busyness of their schedules. The few pastors who met were also busy, but apparently they assigned a greater value to relationship building and partnering as a whole. It may well be that some pastors wrongly perceive their colleagues who prioritize gathering for fellowship and forming partnerships as simply having nothing better to do with their time. The denominational, ethnic, and cultural lines of demarcation seem pretty well established where churches are concerned. And by appearances, everyone seems comfortable with that blend.

Socially speaking, New Rochelle is a safe community with little, if any, racial tension among its diverse population. When compared to neighboring municipalities of its size in the Lower Westchester region, it actually stands out as exceptional in many categories. For example, the high school, now 41 percent Latino is a telling reflection of the city's growing diversity, and is among the state's best.

However, New Rochelle still faces issues that are common to most growing suburban communities. High property values and disproportionately high taxes, for example, add to the cost of living in New Rochelle. Generally speaking, this is true of Westchester County as a whole. High taxes make it the most expensive county in the nation. Most of the migration is happening among the middle class who are concerned about having enough to live on after retirement. Simultaneously the influx of immigrants (mostly Latinos from South America) is on the rise.

As a consequence, homelessness has been on the increase for the past few years. Through social interaction, the pastors have been able to gain some insights into that growing demographic. As much as 50 percent of the homeless comes from neighboring

cities because of New Rochelle's reputation for safety. The city's homeless shelter can only provide them a bed for the night, but has no programs in place to house them during the day. This situation forces many of the homeless to take to the streets to pass the hours until they can return to the shelter.

The Mayor and City Manager are doing what they can to address the problems and provide solutions. However, politicians are not always given to taking the long-term systemic approach to problem solving, since the keeping of campaign promises require quick solutions. Seeking to do our part, the author's church has tried to fill the void by providing hot coffee, sandwiches and warm clothing to the homeless who seek shelter by the Library Green, a park located in the center of the downtown area on which the city's library is located. However, shortly after launching this ministry, the author and his family were encouraged by a member of the City Council to redirect our ministry elsewhere so as not to encourage the homeless to gather in the adjacent park. The homeless presence there was seen as a blemish on the face of the community.

Dealing with the Challenges

What the author have observed from working closely with pastors over the years is that there are some very real challenges involved when it comes to getting pastors to come together. Some of these reasons are legitimate and others, in the author's opinion, are just excuses. The following is a short list of some of those challenges.

Busyness

Most pastors are so busy dealing with problems in their own churches that they rarely have time to think deeply about dealing with the problems in their communities. It is easy to see how this can happen and why so many pastors fall victim to their own time-consuming agendas. This is particularly true for bi-vocational pastors with young families. Unless pastors intentionally assign value to building relationships with other local pastors, getting together for any reason can hardly become a priority - one that he/she would make time for.

Hopelessness

Once a pastor does decide to start caring about the community, there is a tendency to get overwhelmed by the enormity and complexity of the problems. After all, for any church to tackle a systemic issue such as homelessness, it must possess both the human and financial resources necessary to effectively address the problem. When one weighs the enormity of the task against their lack of resources, the natural tendency is to become discouraged and end up leaving it to local government to find the solutions. This was the case with the author, initially. The author was only looking at what his church could do, instead of seeing the bigger picture. However, the author had to realize that his church was only one of the many congregations that were a part of Christ's larger church in the city.

Intimidation

Pastors of small churches, in particular, are more likely to deal with the challenge of intimidation than pastors of larger, growing churches. This is more likely to be the

case when pastors measure their value by the size of their churches. The result is to think that there is hardly anything that pastors of small churches can contribute, so they end up being counted out, or worse, counting themselves out. If the convener of the meeting is not intentional about creating a non-competitive atmosphere where camaraderie reigns and the playing field is leveled, the pastors of small churches will likely not return to the meeting if they even come at all.

Nursing Grudges

Some pastors might even harbor resentment towards other pastors. Resentment is usually evident in cases where members may have migrated from one church to another neighboring church, particularly if the church to which they have migrated is a growing church. The feeling is that the perceived success of the pastor whose church is growing is at the expense of the other whose church is smaller. Having both lost and gained new members from people transferring from one of the local churches in his city, the author can certainly identify with this.

Most pastors might be hesitant to voice this sentiment, but it is nonetheless, a source of division among local churches. It is the author's opinion that local pastors relating with one another, as opposed to avoiding one another, can be a way of minimizing the migration of people from church to church. As the author's experience has shown, pastors will refuse to fellowship with their colleagues when personal resentments like these exist.

Different Doctrines

While every church is built on the Rock, Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, there are various secondary doctrinal perspectives that makes each church distinct in its theological/philosophical approach to ministry. Unfortunately, these doctrinal and philosophical distinctions too often divide pastors. Some pastors seem more committed to remaining in the perceived safety of their doctrinal camp rather than building relationships with other pastors in their city. Most pastors agree that collaboration should be done about the eroding conditions in our city. Pastors understand that unity makes us stronger; however, when it comes to actually working together, everyone seems reluctant to take the first step because of the secondary theological differences.

Staying Relevant

Politicians and those who understand power often marvel at the competitive, territorial nature of Church leaders. They cannot understand why church leaders do not work together. No doubt, Jesus must wonder too. These politicians see the Church as weak, ineffective and, in some instances, irrelevant, because of its seeming inability to address the specific needs within the community.

To politicians a relevant church is one that understands its social mandate and is committed to living out that mandate. Unfortunately, most churches seem not to care much about how they are perceived by outsiders. However, while the Church leaders' attitudes of indifference prevail, the Church is steadily losing its place as a valued and influential institution in its community and within the broader society. However,

churches that are committed to the task of adding value to their community are relevant and therefore not so easily marginalized.

Political Agendas

For this author, the whole idea of church partnership is clear – it is about the reign and glory of God in the earth. As God’s people, our priority is to promulgate the agenda of the kingdom of God while keeping it from becoming co-opted by the politics of the world. The Church is a special entity with a special identity and calling. Ronald J. Sider, John M. Perkins, Wayne L. Gordon and F. Albert Tizon in their book *Linking Arms, Linking Lives: How Urban-Suburban Partnerships Can Transform Lives* discuss the Christian’s call to community; they show that a person called by God is a countercultural formation which “demands that God’s people take on a fundamentally different agenda than the rest of the world.”¹⁰

To put the church’s prophetic role in football terms, pastors are neither the visiting team nor the home team. Rather church leaders are more like the officiating team. Like the officiating team, church leaders are not here to take sides. Those are roles best left to fans and cheerleaders. Instead the church leader’s role is to enforce the rules and hold the players in the game accountable. When the players do not play according to the rules, the leaders have a responsibility to blow the whistle and throw the yellow flag.

¹⁰ Ronald J. Sider, John M. Perkins, Wayne L. Gordon, and F. Albert Tizon, *Linking Arms, Linking Lives: How Urban-Suburban Partnerships Can Transform Lives* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 59.

This indicates that the church must be free to decry injustice whenever and wherever such is found -and that is without partiality. This is the prophetic function that the church leader has been given and authorized by heaven to carry perform. It is one the church leaders must do faithfully or chaos will ensue. Should we the church leaders forget this, we forfeit our ability to influence the world through the principles of the kingdom of heaven. In essence, we lose our ability to be the salt and light the world desperately needs.

The Pew Research Center Forum on Religion and Public Life found that 71 percent of Americans identified as Christian in 2014—down from 78 percent in 2007.¹¹ In the same period, Americans identifying as having no religion grew from 16 percent to 23 percent. Fifty-six million Americans do not observe any religion, the second largest community after Evangelicals. The United States still remains home to more Christians than any other nation, with roughly seven in ten continuing to identify with some branch of Christianity.¹²

That is more than enough people to command the respect of any political party in this country. However, it is difficult to make sound political choices when the powers that be are the ones who control the narrative. The end result is that Evangelicals and Catholics alike now find themselves divided, while their religious freedoms are

¹¹ “Christian Population in Numbers by Country Life,” Pew Research Center Forum on Religion and Public Life, accessed May 12, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/table-christian-population-in-numbers-by-country/>.

¹² “US Christian Numbers” ‘decline sharply’, poll finds. “US Christian numbers,” Pew Research Center Forum on Religion and Public Life, accessed November 5, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/table-christian>.

disappearing at an alarming rate.

Politics has been one of the greatest sources of division within the Church. However, like the eight hundred-pound gorilla in the room, few pastors are willing to acknowledge it. It seems our political party (Democratic and Republican party) affiliations command more loyalty than the kingdom of God we represent. The perception that one party is the champion for the poor and minorities and the other is for the rich has been a useful tool in the hands of those who have mastered the art of dividing and conquering.

As a result, we the church leaders find ourselves blinded to truth and a pure sense of justice, unable to affirm what may actually be in the best interest of all because it came from the political party we are against. In similar fashion, we find ourselves affirming things we fundamentally disagree with on solid biblical grounds just because it comes from the political party we are aligned with.

Sadly, few Christians would seriously entertain the idea of crossing political party lines when necessity demands and using their vote to empower individuals who might actually be able to govern with a true sense of biblical justice. For unknown reasons, Christians treat political party loyalty like badge of honor -a badge worn with such pride it sends a clear message that our politics are stronger than our religious faith.

All too often brother is pitted against brother, sometimes at the expense of friendships and at the compromise of kingdom values, simply because of political party politics. However, this only succeeds because Christians are content to follow the prevailing political narrative instead of being informed about their politics from the biblical narrative, and being committed to kingdom values.

Political agendas can also obstruct and stymie initiatives generated by the Church. Pastors who decide to partner for kingdom initiatives must zealously guard against allowing their initiatives to be co-opted by political agendas and politicians who have mastered the art of using church leaders to further their own interests by making hollow promises. We must believe in our God-given vision and press those kingdom initiatives forward with patience and persistent prayers. Let the politicians be the ones beating a path to the doorsteps of the churches to seek out partnerships with the Church, and not the other way around.

Spiritual Warfare

Politicians are not the only ones who understand power; the spiritual world of darkness (Eph 6:10-12) also understands power and enjoys great success in ravaging cities, despite the presence of many churches within these cities. A perfect example of this is the neighboring city of Mount Vernon where the author pastored for ten years. It is the author's conviction that unity among churches does not just affect the socio-political realms of a city, but it has also been proven to significantly shift the spiritual atmosphere.

Lest pastors forget, the unseen, spiritual world exercises great influence in the affairs of the seen. It is this author's opinion that these spiritual forces also influence churches within a city and region to behave in divisive ways. Their influence is clearly evident in some of the aforementioned challenges, including politics. How else can one explain the enmity and competition that exists between some pastors? Why else in a city with a population of nearly eighty thousand would pastors quibble over a few people

leaving their church when there are so many unreached individuals? In the words of the apostle Paul, “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against... the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”(Eph 6:12)

Recent Challenges to Church Partnership

More recently the issue of juvenile justice has come to the front and center. Both the Ferguson and DC-Baltimore riots and the ensuing protests that have reached the streets of New York City have created a heightened awareness of how people of color are treated by the police. As a result, tensions between police and community are high and escalating. Feeling the need to join the rest of the nation and speak out against injustice, some local pastors organized a protest in New Rochelle, ignoring the risk of inviting similar anti-police sentiments within the community.

Not wanting to be a part of the protest, a few colleagues and the author elected to take what was considered to be a more productive course of action. We use the access afforded us to have honest, meaningful dialogue with local police and elected officials in order to forge initiatives, such as the aforementioned Clergy Rapid Response Team.

This method highlights just one of the many ways the united Church could become a powerful and effective agency for social change. In the author’s opinion, no one has quite the platform a local pastor has on a weekly basis to inform and shape the perspectives of the people in a given community. And when pastors unite as one prophetic voice to confront these issues, and become the hands and feet of Jesus to serve,

the author believe things are more likely to change. However, making this a reality is no easy matter.

In the interest of full disclosure, choosing to sit out the local protest for the author was a difficult decision. It was a choice between either staying true to the author's deepest convictions or trading them in, in hopes of gaining some relational capital with the pastors. To drop out of the group would mean possibly drawing a proverbial line in the sand with respect to our philosophical approach to change. And frankly, that was not the right time for more walls to be erected.

In retrospect, the author does not second-guess the rightness of his decision. However, the decision did end up costing some, if not all, the relational capital the author had built up with the two most prominent Baptist pastors in the city. Previously, it had been difficult to get these pastors to participate in anything the group was doing, but the rally was their initiative and the author was asked to participate. Initially, the author saw this as an answer to prayer and perhaps the beginning of the formation of a strong coalition. These pastors were zealous to march and decry the injustice of racism, not so much as it pertained to the City of New Rochelle specifically, but more in the broader national sense.

The Mayor, City Manager, and Police Chief who attended the planning meeting asked the pastors to consider postponing the meeting for another time since it was the week before Christmas and they would all be out of town. Additionally, it had only been a week since two New York City police officers were been gunned down in a revenge shooting.

Postponing would have meant having the Mayor and Police Chief march with the pastors and also speak at the rally in a show of solidarity. Strategically, this was a time when the nation desperately needed to see a city united against injustice as opposed to being torn apart. From where the author stood, this seemed like a perfectly reasonable request, one with which the author was ready to comply. However, a few of the pastors felt it was something they needed to push back against, comparing it to when Dr. King was asked to not cross the bridge in Selma.

Also, there were some pastors who took offense at the Mayor and Police Chief's suggestion that any form of public demonstration could potentially spark a riot. In their minds, such a notion had no basis other than that it was as a group of Black churches, and as such we were being stereotyped. This only deepened their conviction to press forward with the initiative, ignoring concerns, and leaving the author in a very awkward position.

Whether the city official's concerns were racially driven or not is difficult to say. The author chooses not to see racism as the cause for every opposition he experiences. And it was at that point that the author's sense of responsibility to his city overrode any warm, fuzzy feelings of oneness that might have begun to build up over the few weeks of praying and planning with these pastors. Whether the rally erupted in violence or not was no longer the point. The author simply failed to see what good could come from taking such a defiant position when partnering with the city officials could have yielded a better outcome.

The fact of the matter is, if these pastors wanted to join the national *Black Lives Matter* movement, there was already a major protest ensuing in New York City (NYC). If the point was to "show our people leadership," as one pastor framed it, then what harm

would there have been in bussing his people into the city to link up with that protest?

Why, at the risk of fomenting anti-police sentiments, hold a rally in New Rochelle where there is no connection with what was happening elsewhere? The author could not see how blatantly defying city officials and ignoring their concerns about public safety fit into his paradigm of seeking the peace of the city.

It is vitally important to identify some of the forces that may have been influencing what the author's thought was irrational behavior from these pastors. Two of these pastors who were the major proponents for the rally, and who were insisting on defying City Hall, had each had major middle income housing construction projects stymied by the city only a few years prior. Their dislike for the Mayor was no secret.

Also at the table was a young City Council Member who had mayoral aspirations. This was a violation of the agreement the group had made that this rally would be an exclusively clergy-driven event and not a platform for politicians to promote their cause. Yet this City Council Member who had made some very controversial anti-police statements via social media only a week prior was given a pivotal role in shaping the character of the event. This issue did not sit well with some of the pastors and it became the starting point of things unraveling.

The author, too, had encountered some stiff resistance from City Hall and the Business Improvement District (BID) when his church took a prime retail space on Main Street. There were many individuals, both residents of the downtown area and some business owners, who were strongly opposed to the author's church setting up shop in one of their prime commercial spaces. At the time of this opposition the city was involved in a major push to attract businesses into the city.

They wanted every storefront occupied with commercial, preferably retail businesses, not places of worship. Interestingly enough, the author's approach was to show them that his church was equally invested in the wellbeing of the city. Thus, a compromise was reached, which ended up winning the ministry a significant amount of favor with the city the author is called to serve. This was something the author treasured and felt the need to protect.

While the author had his own story to tell about city politics, his resolve was to come to the table with positive sentiments. What the author had experienced only deepened his convictions about his placement in the city and provided him with a stellar opportunity to demonstrate his vested interest in its betterment. As a church in the city that is for the city, the author has kept his resolve to seek its peace and to work for its prosperity. It also laid the foundation for future partnerships.

The author chose not to see nor treat other players in the system as his enemies, simply because he has come to accept, as the apostle Paul says, "...our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities and against the powers of this dark world and spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Eph 6:12) Thanks to God's gracious dealings that experience left the author with more friends to work with in City Hall than enemies.

Still, the author knew that choosing not to participate in the protest would come at the expense of whatever friendships and trust he had built with those particular pastors in his city. The author's decision led to two other pastors also dropping out, essentially splitting the newly formed coalition in half. The protest went on without us, and, thankfully, without incident. Still, only time will tell what, if any, damage might have

been done to the reputation of the wider Church in the city. As the *Black Lives Matter* movement foments more and more anti-police sentiments nationwide, it will be interesting to see what, if any impact it will have on the author's city, and whether the Church will be able to exert some positive influence going forward.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to discover what it takes to foster a culture of unity and cooperation among local churches that can lead to partnerships for social transformation. This is grounded in the author's deeply held belief that though there are many congregations in a city, Christ has only one Church. His Church carries both a spiritual and a social mandate to bring God's shalom to their respective communities.

That mandate is not only expressed in the spiritual transformation of individual lives, but more broadly, in the social impact of the Church upon the community. However, if smaller churches hope to make an impact, they must find ways to link arms with other churches and work together to accomplish that. This is the main objective of this research - to learn how best that can be done against the backdrop of the author's local context and with all the challenges pastors face.

Research Questions

The primary research question this thesis-project will address is: How can a culture of unity and cooperation be fostered among churches that can lead to kingdom

partnerships for social transformation? While there may be many congregations in every city, Christ has but one Church. Effective kingdom partnerships are only possible where a culture of unity and cooperation exists.

Thus, this thesis-project will explore how that culture of cooperation can be fostered in the author's context; also, it will explore how through that culture of unity and cooperation local churches can form partnerships with the goal of social engagement in mind. Towards that end, the following subsidiary research questions will also be addressed.

- 1) How important is doctrinal uniformity to the subject of church partnerships?
- 2) How can the Church become more relevant to its community?
- 3) What are some ways that Church in partnership can effectively meet the challenges within its community?
- 4) What are some of the personal and spiritual benefits of working in partnership with other pastors?

Limitations of the Study

While the author believes that this study could add something to the discussion of how a culture of cooperation among local pastors can be fostered, he's also aware that it will have some limitations. As previously mentioned, this is a study that mostly involved churches in the four major cities of Lower Westchester County. It is difficult to forecast the kind of impact such a study done within a limited region and among so few churches (relatively speaking), can have.

But the author has intentionally included enough diversity among the church leaders who were either interviewed or who participated in the partnering aspects of the project in hopes of achieving as broad a perspective as possible. The thing to keep in mind about church partnerships of this nature is that they are usually within regions where cities are in close proximity or sometimes confined to singular municipalities. Thus, even though some of the principles uncovered during the course of this study may have universal application, the author's aim is not to focus on building a national network but a local network that focuses on social impact.

Because the author's target audience is mostly pastors, it does not in any way suggest that someone who is not a church leader could not benefit from the insights gained from the study. What it does suggest is that someone who is not in church leadership may find the author's approach in some things to be wanting. And that is to be expected. There are related themes, which this project could not adequately address.

Nevertheless, this thesis-project is an honest, thorough treatment of the analysis of the information gathered from the research as well as from the author's personal experience. One should be able to experience positive results by applying the practical, biblical principles that are set forth within - principles that can have far-reaching implications for ministry leaders in any context.

CHAPTER TWO

Introduction to the Theological Framework

In this chapter the author will explore how the underlying teachings of scripture influenced his relationships with other pastors and how his theological reflections relate to the theme of this thesis-project. The author will be relying upon the input from respected Bible commentators to shed light upon the passages he has selected for his reflections. The author's expectation is that the Bible commentators' comments will provide him with the insights and language needed to better articulate ideas and concepts that he has been implementing in his ministry.

In order to build a case, this chapter has been divided into two sections. The first section explores selected passages from the Old Testament that establish a pattern for unity and partnerships. The second section reviews selected passages from the New Testament that lays a foundation for church unity and partnerships.

Old Testament Foundations

Although the word partnership does not appear frequently within the pages of scripture, themes such as community, cooperation, and collaboration are pervasive throughout. Both the Old and New Testaments provide us ample references upon which a

solid theological framework can be constructed. A cursory glance at the Old Testament reveals some outstanding examples of collaboration.

In Genesis 1, we see the Holy Trinity's collaborative work in the creation. In Genesis 2, we see the first human partnership when God decided that it was not good for the man (Adam) he had created to be alone. God had charged Adam with the responsibility of taking care of the Garden of Eden, and therefore created for him a partner in Eve. In Genesis 11, we see the power of partnership - though for evil intent - in the construction of the tower of Babel.

Genesis 14 shows how Abram's special partnerships with his allies brought him victory against insurmountable odds in the battle of the opposing kings. We also find strong partnership themes in the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah's efforts to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem were only accomplished through partnerships. His partnership efforts are an example of how Church and government can partner to bring restoration and shalom to cities.

In Psalm 133 we find a powerful word-picture of the beauty and power of unity that commands God's blessings. Finally, when we consider Israel, a nation comprised of twelve tribes, each one distinct in character, we can see evidence of unity in diversity. Furthermore, the nation of Israel as a whole had a special partnership with God that afforded them such great favor that it was said concerning them: "five of you shall chase a hundred, and a hundred of you shall chase ten thousand, and your enemies shall fall before you by the sword."(Lev 26:8)

The statement itself is an affirmation of the power of partnership - specifically, God's partnership with his people. Though Israel was small as a nation, with God as a

partner there was no enemy they could not conquer. Let us now briefly explore a few of these passages and see how they relate to the focus of this project.

The Godhead as a Foundation for Cooperation

Genesis records the first act of creation in which God brought everything that exists into being. From nothing God brought forth everything, simply by his spoken word as stated here:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was, formless and empty darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning - the first day. (Gen 1: 1-5)

It is easy to read the creation account and miss the collaboration between the members of the Godhead through which the entire created order came about. Within the Godhead we see what must be considered the starting point for our study, as it provides us with the perfect picture of unity and cooperation.

Each person in the eternal Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is distinct in their personality, but unmistakably one in essence, and one in their creative and redemptive purpose. As we can see here in Genesis, in the act of creation the Father speaks, the Word creates and the Spirit broods over creation, bringing forth life. Genesis 1 records a total of eight times where God the Father spoke and what he spoke came into existence.

Partners in Creation

In God's final creative expression, he declared: "Let us make man in our own image, in our own likeness, so they may rule" (Gen 1:26). Although scripture does not provide much detail as to the specific role each member of the Godhead played in the creation of man, we can be certain that this was as much a collaborative effort as was for the rest of His creative work.

The role of the Word and Spirit are explicit with respect to the rest of creation, but implicit where it comes to the creation of man. However, the invitation "let us make man" (Gen 1:26) emphasizes the Father's desire to involve each member of the Godhead in the act in some way. Exactly how each is involved we cannot say, but we know from the invitation "let us" (Gen 1:26), that the creation of man is the result of a divine collaborative effort.

Partnership Between God and Man

God's creation of man is another form of partnership - between the Trinity and humanity. In defining humanity's physical and moral limitations, R. B. Hughes and J.C. Laney, in their book *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary*, pointed out that "The end of Genesis 1 and the beginning of Genesis 2 take the creation account one step further by clarifying the following three roles which mankind was to fill."¹

¹ R.B. Hughes and J.C. Laney, *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 10.

The concept of roles to fill indicates a partnership here between God and man. This agrees with Dr. Bobby Bose's comments concerning the partnership of the Trinity in his article "Whole World, Whole Gospel, Whole Church: A Systemic Understanding of God's Mission" where he states that "God created human beings in his own image and asked them to enjoy and take care of this God-created ecological system as his stewards or vice-regents on earth."²

Hughes and Laney further defines Adam's role by pointing out that:

Mankind's first, role was to populate the earth (Gen 1:28). This reveals some aspects of the nature and abilities of men and women: people were created to be members of families. Everyone was created to be a social creature. The second was to subdue the physical earth (Gen 1:26)... Subduing means taming the earth and caring for it so that it will continue to be of profitable use... The third role given to man was his rule over the animals, but not over other humans (Gen 1:26, 28).³

We may take both Hughes and Laney and Bose's statements as confirming that the very existence of mankind is based upon a partnership with the Creator. The role of man is to be God's vice-regents and custodians of the earth, while God's role is to be that of sustainer of all creation.

² Bose, Bobby, "Whole World, Whole Gospel, Whole Church: A Systemic Understanding of God's Mission," *Africanus Journal*, 4, no1 (April 2012): 31

³ Hughes and Laney, *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary*, 10.

A Partner for Adam

The example of God partnering with man is immediately followed by the first human partnership. This first example of a human partnership is between Adam and Eve. The reading of scripture would indicate that God first created Adam and placed him in the Garden to take care of it (Gen 2:15). However, it eventually became apparent that the weight of responsibility would necessitate a partner. The biblical account shows God performing a surgical procedure in which he removed a rib from the man's side. From that rib God formed the woman, whom he then presented to Adam. This was to be Adam's suitable helper (or partner) as noted here:

The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him...So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man. (Genesis 2: 18-23)

In describing the nature of this new partnership, A.P. Ross, F. Walvoord, and R. B. Zuck, eds., in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures, Genesis*, shows that the woman was in no way inferior to the man but rather, "that what was said about him in Genesis 2:7 was also true of her. They both had the same nature. But what man lacked (his aloneness was not good) she supplied, and what she lacked he supplied. The culmination was **one flesh** (v. 24)—the complete unity of man and woman in marriage."⁴

⁴ A. P. Ross, J. F. Walvoord, and R. B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures, Genesis*, vol. 1 (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), 31.

From this account, we can therefore conclude that marriage by definition is a partnership. God has established that human relationships should be patterned after His own. The writer of Ecclesiastes alluded to this when he declared:

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: if one falls down, his friend can lift him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to lift him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A threefold cord is not easily broken. (Eccl 4:9-12)

Thus in Eve, God provided Adam added grace. From their partnership he would not only receive the blessing of companionship, but also the return for his work would exponentially increase. By this example, God, once again, emphasizes for the benefit of the human race, the necessity of partnerships. One can only accomplish so much alone. None of the aforementioned responsibilities that God had charged Adam with could have been accomplished outside of his partnership with Eve.

This partnership between Adam and Eve originated in the mind of God; it did not come from Adam. However, it must be seen as a foregone conclusion on God's part, rather than an afterthought. As we read in Genesis, "Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and **let them rule...**" (Gen 1:26) Verse 27 immediately reiterates the previous verse with the words, "...in the image of God he created him; **male and female he created them.**" (Gen 1:26-27)

Although Adam was the first to be created, implicit within the language of God was his intention of a future partnership: "Let them rule" and "Male and female he created them" (Gen 1:26-27) are all statements that appear in scripture prior to God forming the woman from the rib of the man. We may determine that by God's declaration that it was "not good for the man to be alone" (Gen 2:18) that he was

establishing a precedent for the human race that not only applies to marriage, but to other areas of human endeavor.

It is also important to observe that it was God who chose Adam's partner. Although we are free to choose our own partners when it comes to family or building kingdom partnerships, it is always best to enlist the help of God when doing so. Note also that everything God needed to create Adam's partner was readily accessible. In choosing a rib from the man, we should observe the need for commonality between those whom God gives us as partners.

While there is room for diversity in some areas, there must be commonality in the vision and values that drive a particular enterprise. Sustainable and fruitful partnerships can only succeed where such agreement exists. In the words of the prophet Amos, "Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?" (Amos 3:3). The writer of Ecclesiastes' symbolic reference to a threefold cord that is not easily broken is not only speaking about the power of partnerships, but also about God who is ever present to provide the grace and wisdom needed to make partnerships all they can be.

Principle Over Purpose in Partnerships

In Genesis 11, we have a remarkable example of the power of partnerships. It shows that through the application of certain principles, partnerships can flourish regardless of their intent. Thus it is an example of principle over purpose in partnership.

The invitation in verse 4 to “come let us build” (Gen 11:4) was not the invitation of the Godhead to a collaborative work of creation, but rather the declaration of the people of Shinar to build their own city and gateway to heaven.

An example of right principles being applied to the wrong purpose is seen here:

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there... They said to each other, Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly. They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth... But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. The LORD said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other... So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel—because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth. (Gen 11: 1-9)

No doubt, the conspiracy of the people of Shinar to build the Tower of Babel was met with devastating consequences from God. However, what one learns from this narrative is that the principle of unity and partnerships can yield fruit regardless of what enterprise they may be directed towards.

Ross et al, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, *Genesis* observed that: The sin of the Shinarites (people in a plain in Shinar) appears to be immense pride. They said, Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves. This was open rebellion against God, an independence of God.”⁵

⁵ Ross, et al., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, *Genesis*, 44.

R. B. Hughes and J.C. Laney further clarifies the nature of their rebellion by pointing out that “the Tower of Babel may have been an early type of Babylonian ziggurat; these pyramid-like towers served as shrines for mountain-dwelling deities. The story of Babel shows how people banded together in an evil effort to block God’s plan for mankind to fill the earth.”⁶

The Babylonians had evidently tapped into the power of cooperation on a level not seen since the first collaborative work of the Trinity. A. P. Ross *et al*, refers to this as “the epitome of ungodly powers.”⁷ However, God took note of what they imagined to do and in God’s evaluation of their actions he noted: “If ... they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.” (Gen 11. 6)

Thus the record in Genesis 11: 1–9 is polemical in that it shows God’s absolute power by bringing swift judgment. What the people considered their greatest strength - unity - God swiftly destroyed by confusing their language (v. 7; cf. v. 9). In this act of judgment, the unmistakable presence of the Godhead acting in partnership is once again evidenced in: “Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.” (Gen 11: 7)

This narrative further underscores the power of unity by showing that regardless of what one seeks to accomplish, unity makes it possible. Even in such rebellious undertakings, the power of partnership can still prove efficacious. At the same time, the narrative also speaks to the destructive power of disunity, which in this case, God employed to bring about an end to the building of Babel.

⁶ Hughes and Laney, *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary*, 15.

⁷Ross, et al., eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, *Genesis*, 45.

Good Versus Bad Partnerships

Here in Genesis 14 we find two examples of partnerships juxtaposed. One is a powerful example of what can be accomplished through human partnerships regardless of evil intent. The other is an example of the kind of partnerships we should pursue—that is partnerships that are properly aligned with God’s plans and purposes. The former, while powerful in its own right, is destined to fail wherever people of faith join together to resist the evil schemes of the adversary. A good partnership in this sense is defined by both the principles and purposes that drive it.

According to Hughes and Laney, “Genesis 14 tells of an early invasion of Palestine by a coalition of four Mesopotamian kings who invaded the plain of the Jordan, subjugating the five cities there, including Sodom (Gen 14:1–3). Lot, Abraham’s nephew, was among those taken captive.”⁸ Theirs was an alliance whose goal was to subjugate and oppress the people living within that region. We can see in the taking of Lot that they viewed human lives as possessions to be taken as spoils of war.

Faced with the daunting task of having to rescue his cousin from this powerful alliance of kings, Abram’s immediate response was to form an alliance of his own. This alliance comprised his 318 household servants and the Amorites, Mamre, Aner and Eschol, who lived in the region (Gen 14:13). As a nomadic people, these servants were, no doubt, farmers and shepherds. As necessity demanded, some may have been required to wield the sword from time to time. Yet despite their being overwhelmingly

⁸ Hughes and Laney, *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary*, 16.

overmatched, they were able to defeat King Kedolaomer's powerful alliance as noted here:

When Abram heard that his relative had been taken captive, he called out the 318 trained men born in his household and went in pursuit as far as Dan. During the night Abram divided his men to attack them and he routed them, pursuing them as far as Hobah, north of Damascus. He recovered all the goods and brought back his relative Lot and his possessions, together with the women and the other people. (Gen 14: 14-16)

Ross *et al*, sums up Abram's miraculous victory with the following comments, "Abram was the general, and the victory was attributed to him (v. 17). But this does not fully explain the triumph. Later Melchizedek attributed the victory to God as part of God's blessing on the patriarch (v. 20). God was working through the life of Abram in accord with His promise."⁹ This victory would attest to the fact that God was working through him, and would become a source of encouragement for future generations, assuring them that God would also fight for them.

It should be observed that Abram's relationship with the Amorites did not simply come about as a result of his adversity. Ross *et al*, noted, "Abram was dwelling in Hebron (13:18), but had a covenant with **Mamre the Amorite** and his brothers **Eshcol and Aner** (14:13; cf. v. 24). The covenant worked in favor of Abram, for the Amorites, who allowed him to dwell with them, had to fight with him."¹⁰ Thus, we may conclude that Abram benefitted both from his covenant with God and from his covenant with the Amorites.

⁹ Ross, et al., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 53.

¹⁰ Ross, et al., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 54.

The covenant that existed between Abram and his allies speaks to the importance of being proactive in building relationships with one's neighbors, an approach every bridge-builder should adopt. Abram's example shows us that covenant relationships are the foundation for effective partnerships. Thus Abram, the Father of faith for both Jews and Christians, may also be known as the father of kingdom partnerships.

His is a classic example of why we should resist feeling overwhelmed when faced with impossible odds. It also shows us why we must resist the tendencies to be 'lone rangers' in ministry. While the latter promises glory for individual accomplishments, more often than not, it sets us up to fail by limiting what we are able to accomplish when we link arms and lives together for a greater cause.

Nehemiah: An Example of Kingdom Partnerships

The book of Nehemiah is one that is particularly familiar to those who study models of urban ministry. His story provides a very rich source of theological reflections on the subject of building partnerships. According to L.O. Richards, in his book *The Bible Reader's Companion* "Nehemiah has proven one of the favorite Bible books; for it reminds us of the impact a single, committed individual can have on a society."¹¹

Although Richards highlights Nehemiah's impact as a single committed individual, we are careful not to confuse his impact with his overall accomplishments. A survey of the first six chapters of the book clearly reveals that his success in rebuilding

¹¹ L. O. Richards, *The Bible Reader's Companion Electronic Edition* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1991), 313.

the walls of Jerusalem was the result of his skill in building partnerships with government officials and in enlisting the help of the Jews that dwelled within the province near the fallen city.

While serving at the Persian winter palace at Susa, Nehemiah received a report that the walls of Jerusalem were broken down and the gates of the city had been burned (Neh 1: 1-3). This was a critical situation as it left the city defenseless against enemy attacks. The fact that Jerusalem had fallen was depressing enough, however; G. A. Getz, A. P. Ross, J. F. Walvoord, and R. B. Zuck, in the *Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures, Nehemiah*, illustrates why this news may have been so discouraging, noting that, “The people had been rebuilding the walls (Ezra 4:12) but were stopped by Artaxerxes who was pressured by some Samaritans and Rehum, the commanding officer, who may have been a Persian responsible to Artaxerxes (Ezra 4:17–23).”¹²

So depressing was the news of the stoppage that Nehemiah’s acknowledged in his own narrative that, “As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying to the God of heaven.” (Neh 1:4) G.A. Getz et al, observed that, “His praying was continual (‘day and night,’ Neh 1:6). Fasting, though not a requirement of the Law except on the annual Day of Atonement, often evidenced one’s distraught condition (cf. 2 Sam. 12:16; 1 Kings 21:27; Ezra 8:23).”¹³

Recognizing the gravity of the situation, Nehemiah appeals to the God of Israel. He begins his prayer by acknowledging God’s relationship with his people. As such,

¹² G. A. Getz, A. P. Ross, J. F. Walvoord, and R. B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures, Nehemiah*, vol. 1 (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), 674.

¹³ Getz, et al., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 674–675.

G.A. Getz et al, provides us with some useful insights regarding his prayer: “**O LORD, God of heaven** (cf. Neh. 1:4), **the great and awesome God** (cf. 4:14; 9:32). “LORD” (Yahweh) speaks of His covenant relationship to Israel.”¹⁴ Thus his appeal was based on God’s long-standing covenant with Israel, which, as we have seen, began with Abraham.

Nehemiah also recognized that he would need favor with man. Since King Artaxexes was the one who had issued the decree to stop building, he was the only one who could reverse it. He then goes on to pray saying: “Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.” (Neh 1:11)

Nehemiah immediately recognized that he would need both the permission of and partnership with the king if he were to attend to the task of rebuilding the walls. Acknowledging this he said, “...because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests.”(Neh 2:8) This partnership with the king would result in his receiving letters from the king that granted him safe conduct to where he was going, as well as letters granting him access to the resources needed for the rebuilding project. This could be viewed as the equivalent of receiving a passport and a credit card from the king.

Regarding Nehemiah’s strategy for building partnerships with the remnant living in the province, Getz discloses that,

Nehemiah knew there was no way he could share with the people in **Jerusalem** what **God** led him to accomplish without first doing some research and planning. After taking time (**three days**) to ponder, pray, and get acquainted with some of the people there, Nehemiah took **a few men** into his confidence, men he could trust.¹⁵

¹⁴ Getz, et al., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 674–675.

¹⁵ Getz, et al., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 677.

Knowledge of the people, knowledge of the place and knowledge of the problem were paramount to being able to put together an effective plan of action. What follows in the ensuing chapters of Nehemiah is yet another miraculous outcome that resulted from the partnership forged between Nehemiah and the people. In the latter portion of chapter two, he casts the vision, rallying the people to rebuild the walls.

In chapter three, Nehemiah coordinates the work. Getz briefly describes the strategic manner in which this was done: “This coordination stands out in the phrases “next to him,” “next to them,” “next to that,” “the next section,” “beside him,” and “beyond them,”¹⁶ which occur twenty-eight times in this chapter. His partnership with the people was one in which everyone worked according to their gifts and in areas that were close to their homes. This ensured their passionate commitment until the work was complete and allowed them to work while staying close to their families. Nehemiah’s role was simply to lead, which involved motivating and keeping them focused on the task at hand.

It should strike us as ironic that Artaxerxes, the heathen king, was the one directly responsible for the condition of Jerusalem’s walls. However, somehow he was willing to partner with Nehemiah in rebuilding it. In Nehemiah we have a biblical model for partnership between churches and government. Although this thesis is primarily about kingdom partnerships, it also sees great value in this type of partnership. Governments, even if they consider themselves secular, are not outside the realm of God’s kingdom.

¹⁶ Getz, et al., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 677.

As Paul shows us that, “For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him,” (Col 1:16); thus governments, by whatever definition, belong to God. They are the instrumentality through which he dispenses justice and shalom to the people.

Unity as the Source of Blessings

Psalms 133 is a brief description of the beauty of unity. It starts off with the Psalmist’s declaration, “Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!” Commentators agree that the occasion on which this Psalm was written was likely the reunion of the whole nation after the civil discords of his (King David’s) early reign. The pilgrims are within the temple engaging in glorious worship together “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron’s beard, down upon the collar of his robes. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the LORD bestows his blessing.” (Ps 133)

Ross *et al*, confirms that this pilgrim Psalm belonged appropriately to the context of congregational worship. He remarked that David’s thought about the beauty of unity “was appropriate for the religious festivals when Israelite families came together to worship their Lord.”¹⁷ This thesis-project is driven by the belief that the blessing that

¹⁷ A. P. Ross, et al., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures, Psalms*, 888.

results from unity within the context of public worship could have an even broader application. More concretely, the question is, Could not the same be true in a city where pastors have learned to dwell together in a non-competitive spirit of brotherhood?’

Moreover, the unity describes here is a heavenly miracle, which D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer and G. J. Wenham, in the *New Bible commentary: 21st Century* observes has had the power to “eradicate divisions (1 Kin. 12:19) and bring *Hermon*, the chief mountain of (northern) Israel and *Zion*, the mountain of (southern) Judah, together in divine life-giving dew (Ex 16:13, 14; Is 26:19; Ho 14:5).”¹⁸ Consequently, it is *there* (emphatic), ‘the Lord has commanded, for evermore, the blessing of life.

Note: the oil that was poured on Aaron’s head naturally flowed down on his beard and shoulders, and onto the breastplate upon which the names of all 12 tribes were engraved. Accordingly, A. P. Ross et al, observed, “The oil thus symbolized the unity of the nation in worship under their consecrated priest. As the oil consecrated Aaron, so the unity of the worshipers in Jerusalem would consecrate the nation under God.”¹⁹

This thesis-project sees a connection between the unity of Psalm 133 and the Pentecostal outpouring, which is recorded in Acts chapter 2. It responds to the question of how we may more broadly apply the blessing of congregational unity to a city or even a nation. Acts 2:1 tells us that the believers were all **with one accord** in one place. No one will argue that what ensued was an unprecedented outpouring of God’s blessing that transformed countless lives. Simon Peter’s sermon confirming the blessing of Pentecost

¹⁸ D. A. Carson, T. France, J. A. Motyer, and G. J. Wenham, eds., *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, 4th ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press Books, 1994), 576.

¹⁹ Ross, et al., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 889.

as that which was promised by the prophet Joel several centuries earlier (Acts 2: 16-21) leads us to conclude that nothing of this magnitude had ever happened at any time during Israelites' history.

While it appears that Joel (the prophet) and David (the psalmist) may have been describing different realities, few would disagree that the blessing of Pentecost was the greatest blessing God ever commanded upon a gathered, united community. This concept of the power of unity will be further explored as we come to the next section. However, we cannot underestimate the message of Psalm 133: God has so designed it that where there is unity among his people, his blessings are sure to follow.

New Testament Theology of Christian Unity

In this section the author will further develop a theological foundation for unity and partnerships. It traces the pattern of collaboration established by the Godhead as seen in the Old Testament and shows how the Church can follow that pattern. In doing so, it makes an argument for: first, why it is both biblical and imperative that a culture of unity and cooperation be the norm among pastors, and second, how a greater evangelistic and social impact can be made through partnership. This entire section will rely mostly upon the gospels and Pauline theology.

Partners in Redemption and Resurrection

This same collaborative pattern that is seen in the act of creation can also be seen in the work of redemption. Consistent with the Old Testament pattern, each member of

the Godhead plays a specific role in the redemptive process. The Father elects (John 17:6). The Son makes atonement for sins (Matt 20:28; 1 Pet 2:24). The Holy Spirit seals those who are redeemed (2 Cor 5:5; Eph. 4:30).

Further evidence of the collaborative work of the Trinity can also be seen in the Resurrection. P. P. Enns, in his book *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, states that, “The biblical accounts indicate each member of the godhead had a particular part in this great act of resurrection. Christ was raised by the power of God the Father (Eph 1:19–20; Ps 16:10), but Christ also had the power to raise Himself (John 10:18). The Holy Spirit was also involved in effecting the resurrection of Christ (Rom 1:4).”²⁰

Throughout the scriptures from the Old Testament to the New, in virtually every way, there is a consistent pattern of the Godhead’s collaboration in every work of God. The biblical narrative bears proof of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, working together as one divine essence to bring about one divine purpose.

As we consider the idea of unity and partnerships, there is much we can draw from what we understand of how the Godhead functions. It is evident that God does nothing alone, but rather seeks to demonstrate community and cooperation in everything he does; this then is a pattern the Church should also seek to follow in doing the work of ministry.

²⁰ P.P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 264.

Jesus Partnered

Commenting on Jesus' earthly ministry, A. B. Bruce in his book *The Training of the Twelve; or, Passages out of the Gospels, Exhibiting the Twelve Disciples of Jesus under Discipline for the Apostleship*, makes the interesting observation that,

In the earlier period Jesus labored single-handed; His miraculous deeds were confined for the most part to a limited area... But by the time when the twelve were chosen, the work of the kingdom had assumed such dimensions as to require organization and division of labor...and His gracious activities were taking on ever-widening range.²¹

Luke highlights how Jesus calls his disciples, noting that, "One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated, apostles." (Luke 6:12-13)

The parallel between Jesus - who is also known as the Last Adam—and the first Adam that was placed in the Garden is difficult to resist. The first Adam began his work in the Garden alone. But God decided it was not good for him to be alone and gave him a wife. Jesus, the Last Adam, also begins his earthly ministry alone. But God, not intending for his Son to be alone in his work, gave him the twelve in answer to his prayer.

The First Adam was given the mandate to "be fruitful and multiply." (Gen 1:28) Jesus' redemptive mission must be seen as carrying a similar mandate. His redemptive work is referred to in Hebrews as "bringing many sons to glory." (Heb 2:10) In the same chapter, Jesus declared, "Here I am and the children whom God has given me" (Heb

²¹ A.B. Bruce, *The Training of the Twelve; or, Passages out of the Gospels, Exhibiting the Twelve Disciples of Jesus under Discipline for the Apostleship* (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1889), 29.

2:103). In Isaiah's prophecy concerning the Son, among the many titles ascribed to him we find "Everlasting Father" (Isa 9: 6).

Thus while Jesus began his ministry alone, for him to go it alone throughout his time on earth would stand in stark contradiction to that which has already been established in scripture. Just as Adam would need Eve to be fruitful, Jesus would also need his twelve to effectively complete his ministry. Through their partnership, the gospel of the kingdom would ultimately reach beyond the borders of Jerusalem to the uttermost parts of the world.

When we consider the enormity of the Great Commission (Matt 28:19-20) - the mandate to disciple nations - dare we imagine such a task as possible apart from building solid partnerships? Can anyone who is called to further the ministry of Jesus accomplish it in isolation? Certainly, if Jesus, the Son of God, chose to enlist the assistance of others, should we not also follow this example? Both Matthew Henry and A. B. Bruce agree with regard to Jesus' selection of the twelve. According to Matthew Henry, "Jesus chose those that should be the constant auditors of his doctrine and eye-witnesses of his miracles, that hereafter they might be sent forth as *apostles*, his *messengers* to the world, to preach his gospel to it, and plant his church in it, v. 13."²²

The nature of their partnership was one in which Jesus functioned as the visionary leader whose primary role was that of Teacher. The lessons he taught were mainly about the kingdom of God, and focused on matters of justice, mercy and faith. This is why he rebuked the Pharisees for neglecting these issues, which he considered the weightier

²² M. Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 1842; Bruce, *The Training of the Twelve*, 29.

matters of the law (Matt 23:23). As Matthew Henry shows us, the disciples would eventually be entrusted with power to heal the sick, cast out demons, and declare the good news about the kingdom of God (Matt 10). While Jesus employed the use of many parables and object lessons to teach them, much of their learning would, no doubt, come from observation.

Bruce points out, “From the time of their being chosen, indeed, the twelve entered on a regular apprenticeship for the great office of apostleship, in the course of which they were to learn, in the privacy of an intimate daily fellowship with their Master, what they should be, do, believe, and teach, as His witnesses and ambassadors to the world.”²³ When he eventually deployed them, he sent them out in teams of two (Mark 6:7). This method of pairing them up in twos is yet another example of strategic partnership. It is based on the principle established in Ecclesiastes, which states that, “two are better than one.” (Eccl 4:6)

Leading up to their being ordained as apostles, Jesus had gone through the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and healing the sick. It was on that occasion that after seeing the multitudes that Matthew describes him as being “moved with compassion for them,” (Matt 9:36) because, as he puts it, “they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. At which point he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” (Matt 9:37-38)

²³ Bruce, *The Training of the Twelve*, 30.

J.D. Grassmick, J. F. Walvoord, and R. B. Zuck in *The Bible Knowledge*

Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures, adds that this manner of pairing them was “a common practice in that day for practical and legal reasons (cf. 11:1; 14:13; John 8:17; Deut 17:6; 19:15).”²⁴ Both Mark and John’s gospels bear record of Jesus employing this method of partnership on other occasions when he sent them out. There were practical reasons for pairing, such as safety, as travelling alone in those days presented some degree of danger.

In addition, legal reasons may have played a part as they were called to represent Jesus, and bear witness to the gospel to the people of Israel, which included bringing back a report to their master. Thus in this regard, they may simply have been complying with a principle established in the Law - that only by the testimony of two or three witnesses was any report legally established (Deut 17:6, 19:15).

One can see the relationship between this principle established in the Law and that which Jesus himself sets forth in Matthew, where he is quoted as saying: “If two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.” (Matt 18:19) Here Jesus’ words uncover what is undoubtedly one of the most underappreciated, yet most potent benefits of partnership - the benefit of answered prayer that comes through agreement.

The two things that we can conclude about church partnerships based on Jesus’ methodology of pairing are: (1) From a practical standpoint, churches in partnership present a more credible witness to the world, and (2) From a legal, spiritual standpoint,

²⁴ J. D. Grassmick, J. F. Walvoord, and R. B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures, New Testament*, vol. 2 (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), 127.

churches in partnership, even as few as two or three, have a special place of power with God that churches working in isolation do not. This is pertinent to the idea of spiritual authority and has great implications for corporate prayer.

Before sending them out to witness, Jesus instructed his disciples thoroughly. “Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans.”(Matt. 10:5) At a glance, his instructions would appear to be a departure from the pattern of inclusiveness seen in the Great Commission where we are instructed to take the gospel to the whole world (Matt 28:18-20), as well as from the openness demonstrated in Jesus’ own life to Samaritans and others (John 4:9-10).

To better clarify this, D.A. Carson, R.T. France, J.A. Motyer, and G.J. Wenham in their book *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, points out, “The startling restriction parallels the limitation of Jesus’ own mission to *the lost sheep of Israel* in 15:24. It is obvious that this was not meant to be a permanent restriction, both from Jesus’ own openness to non-Jews in 8:5–13 and 15:21–28 and from his explicit instructions in 28:19–20.”²⁵

For our purposes this is an important point, as some may read this as justification for excluding others based on their denominational, ethnic, or even political affiliations. Fostering a culture of cooperation among churches demands openness to all who hold the faith in common, irrespective of minor doctrinal differences. Would we be building unity if we were to only seek fellowship with those within our respective ethnic groups or denominational circles?

²⁵ D.A. Carson et. al., *New Bible Commentary*, 917.

Jesus Prayed for His Partners

Jesus not only partnered, he also prayed for those who were in partnership with him. For reasons unknown, the pattern for prayer that Jesus gave his disciples (Matt 6:9-13) has become known by most as *The Lord's Prayer*. The author contends however, that this intercessory prayer offered on behalf of His disciples towards the end of His earthly ministry here in John 17:6-9 is far worthier of such an appellation.

According to E. A. Blum, J. F. Walvoord, and R. B. Zuck in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* "This prayer of intercession reveals Jesus' concern and love for his apostles."²⁶ Chief among his concerns was that they should remain united in him and in their purpose, in his absence. That concern can be seen in his repeated reference in his prayer to the theme of unity: "Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name -the name you gave me - so that they may be one as we are one." (John 17:11b) Further along in his prayer Jesus extended that request for unity to include the Church, those who would later come to faith through the testimony of the apostles:

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me... I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one... I in them and you in me... May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17: 20-23)

Jesus made no distinction between those who heard him personally and those who would come to faith based on the apostles' preaching. The Church in whatever age and

²⁶ E.A. Blum, J. F. Walvoord, and R. B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures, John*, vol. 2 (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), 331.

by whatever denominational stripe is one Church with one Lord. For both those who personally sat at his feet to learn directly from him and those who would come to faith through the ages, Jesus' prayer is for unity. E.A. Blum *et al*, sums up the importance of unity as it relates to the mission of the Church: "The pattern for unity is the relationship between the Father and the Son (21), the basis is abiding in the Father and the Son, and the purpose is evangelistic (21, 23). The cycle here is faith leading to unity, which leads others to faith."²⁷

If we pause to reflect briefly upon the condition of the Church today in relation to Jesus' prayer, we can readily see how far we have fallen short of his requirements. But perhaps our reflection should not end with the Church. Perhaps we should consider the condition of the world as well; the world that the Church has been commissioned to disciple is presently in turmoil and it is a world where hostility towards the church is on the rise.

There can be little doubt that a united Church is what Jesus had in mind when he said, "Upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." (Matt. 16:16) One imagines such a Church as an unstoppable force, advancing the gospel until the whole earth is filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, not one weakened by division, competitiveness and in-fighting.

Although Blum *et al*, correctly show the relationship Christian unity has with evangelism, evangelism should not be seen as the end in of itself. Armstrong is quick to point out, "The goal of our unity is the same as that of the triune God: to reveal God's

²⁷ Blum, et al., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 331.

love to the world.”²⁸ In Jesus’ words, “that the world may believe that you have sent me and have loved them as you have loved me.” (John 17:21) Thus unity as a witness of God’s love may be a more useful way of understanding the intent of Jesus’ prayer for unity.

Armstrong proceeds to make the point that Jesus is after “our relational unity... a unity between persons that is rooted in their relationships with one another.”²⁹ Seen in this way, evangelism then becomes the natural outgrowth of the Church’s focus on harmonious living. Taking Jesus’ train of thought to its logical conclusion, there is no more credible witness to the world than the evidence of cooperation and unity among God’s people.

Not coincidentally, this is the last lesson Jesus taught before his crucifixion - the importance of loving and serving one another. In his words: “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (Jn. 13:34-35) This is the pattern of the Godhead we are called to reflect upon. Is not our disconnectedness from the Head the basis for all our divisions? And is not division the breeding ground for competitiveness? How can the Church return to simply learning to “be with him”? (Mark 3:14)

²⁸ John Armstrong, *Your Church is Too Small: Why Unity in Christ’s Mission is Vital to the Future* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 52.

²⁹ Armstrong, *Your Church is Too Small*, 43.

Unity and the Blessing of Pentecost

Since the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the world has not been the same. S. D. Toussaint J. F. Walvoord, and R. B. Zuck in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures, Acts Volume* agrees with the popular notion that this momentous occasion marks the official birth of the Church. According to Toussaint, *et al*, “The church is constituted a body by means of Spirit baptism (1 Cor 12:13). The first occurrence of the baptism of the Spirit therefore must indicate the inauguration of the church... The church, therefore, came into existence then.”³⁰ The writer of the Book of Acts records that:

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. (Acts. 2:1-4)

All at once, the good news about the kingdom of God went “viral.” Because as God would have it, many Jews from the Diaspora, whom the Bible described as “devout men” from every nation under heaven just happened to be in Jerusalem at the time (Acts 2:5). By no coincidence these men happened to overhear these followers of Jesus declaring great things about God in their own language.

The implication here is that many of the eyewitnesses to that event were so greatly impacted by the experience; they each carried back with them to their nations and

³⁰ S. D. Toussaint, J. F. Walvoord, and R. B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures, Acts*, vol. 2 (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), 357.

cities both the word and fire of Pentecost. Thus, what began then and there from Jerusalem was a movement - a movement of people and a movement of the gospel that would quickly engulf that region and ultimately the 'then known' Roman world.

This outpouring of the Spirit, which gave birth to the *ecclesia*,³¹ was undoubtedly precipitated by the prayer of those in the Upper Room in what appeared to be an all-night prayer session. The scriptures state that "they were all together in one place" (Acts 2:1). However, the New King James Version replaces the word "together" with the phrase "with one accord." The word "accord" is synonymous with agreement, harmony, and unity. In this light, the togetherness described was beyond mere physical placement, but was more descriptive of the atmosphere of oneness of spirit that prevailed among the believers.

If we hearken back to Jesus' teaching regarding the power of agreement, and to his prayer for unity among his followers (Matt. 12:25, 18:19; John 17:11, 20-23), it is clear the disciples had taken hold of that truth and had begun working as a unit in his absence. That sense of harmony that was present among them was critical in attracting, what can be likened to, the "commanded blessing" spoken of in Psalm 133.

Given the magnitude of the Spirit's outpouring and the overall impact of Pentecost, the connection is difficult to deny; we are hard pressed to find a better example of unity precipitating the commanded blessing anywhere else in scripture. Acts 4:33-34 tells us: All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possession was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the

³¹ A word used synonymously with church, which denotes "a congregation." It is used intentionally here to highlight the character of the church as a gathering of people and not as a building, which is the proper meaning of "ekklesia."

apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.” The unity that was present at Pentecost only increased as the Church grew, and it continued for some time.

What we read in Acts 4:32–5:10 is an example of how that unity was lived out among the believers in community. Toussaint *et al.*, point out, “**The believers were** unified not only spiritually (**one in heart and mind**) but also materially (cf. 2:44–45). Their selling of their goods was voluntary and the distribution was according to **need**.”³² None will deny that this grace that was afforded the early church was directly attributed to the spirit of harmony that was among them.

This thesis-project is in favor of voluntary communal sharing and believes that the Bible espouses this as the norm for Christian living. Not only should individual congregations do this among their members, churches in partnership are also required to pool their resources in order to achieve their stated objective. That said, communal sharing should never be manipulative or coercive, nor should it exclude the importance of taking personal responsibility and earning one’s own living, which the New Testament also raises as an ideal for Christian living (Gal 6:5; 2 Thess 3:11-18; 1 Tim 5:8).

The ultimate goal of communal sharing is to advance the mission of the Church. As S.D. Toussaint *et al.*, point out, “This was not Christian socialism. It was a free-will arrangement for the support of the church, used only temporarily because evidently the early church expected Christ to come in their generation.”³³

³² Toussaint, et al., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 364.

³³ Toussaint, et al., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 365.

So critical was this spirit of unity to the expansion of the gospel that Ananias and Saphira's attempt to deceive the apostles resulted in God's swift judgment falling upon them (Acts 5:1-10). The swiftness and severity of their judgment only attests to the seriousness of their sin, which appeared to have posed a threat to the communal harmony. That the gospel increased as a result of their judgment might well be a confirmation of this fact, as the ensuing verses show the apostles moving in a greater dimension of ministry grace - healing the sick and performing many miracles (Acts 2:12 -16).

This thesis-project sees a connection between the fear of God that fell upon the people and the new dimension of apostolic grace that followed. And thus we may also conclude from this account that unity and the fear of the Lord are foundational principles to the life and advancement of the Church. Each one plays a critical role in fostering a culture of cooperation among churches.

Let us now examine briefly the ministry of the apostle Paul and how his ministry furthers the spirit of unity and partnership building in the early church, after the pattern established by Christ.

The Apostle Paul: Building Bridges

As we will see in the ensuing pages, the apostle Paul was a bridge builder. His letters to the churches are filled with pleas for the church to behave in ways that preserved and promoted the spirit of unity and harmony. His letter to the church at Philippi reveals not only a partnership, but also a genuine concern for the wellbeing of the believers there. "I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for

all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 1:3–6)

The Jerusalem Collection

The Jerusalem collection is an example of churches partnering together to provide a solution to a problem. In this case, it was the believers in Jerusalem that had been victimized by the devastating effects of the famine. The writer of Acts gives us the account here:

During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul. (Acts 11:27-30)

Christopher R. Bruno and Matt Dirks answer the question as to why the impact of this famine was most severely felt among the believers dwelling in Jerusalem.

Christopher R. Bruno et al, establish that, “the first new converts were Jewish pilgrims who had traveled across the Roman Empire to celebrate Pentecost. As a result of their conversion, family members they lodged with disowned them and put them out on the streets. As despised Christians, it was impossible for them to get jobs and support their families.”³⁴ Thus while the effects of the famine were widely felt among those dwelling within the Roman Empire, Christians were the most severely disadvantaged.

³⁴ Bruno et al., *Churches Partnering Together*, 293.

Galatians chapter 2 describes the specific trip in which Paul forged a strategic partnership with the apostles in Jerusalem. D. K. Campbell, J. F. Walvoord, and R. B. Zuck note that, “It was concern for the poor that had brought Paul to Jerusalem in order to bring them financial relief (cf. Acts 11:29–30). It was the same concern which motivated him on his third missionary journey to raise large welfare offerings for needy Christians in Jerusalem (cf. 1 Cor. 16:1–3).”³⁵ James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do. (Gal 2: 9-11)

In the spirit of partnership, those apostles that were based in Jerusalem agreed to focus on reaching the Jews while Paul and Barnabas would minister to Gentiles spread out across the Roman Empire. As Paul and Barnabas went about planting churches among the Gentiles, they made it their mission to “remember the poor.” (Gal 2:10) Once they successfully evangelized a city, established a Christian community and raised up leaders to guide the church, Paul would call the church toward partnership in the effort of collecting money for the poor in Jerusalem.

This was a mammoth task that took over ten years to complete, but one that could not have been accomplished outside of covenant partnerships. To follow Paul’s interactions with the churches, in particular, the church in Macedonia, one gets a better

³⁵ D. K. Campbell, J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures, Galatians*, vol. 2 (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), 594

sense of how deep the bonds of these partnerships were. Paul's commendation for their generosity is a telling example of the level of commitment that they had demonstrated in this partnership, despite their "severe test of affliction" (2 Cor 8:1-6) and their abject state of poverty.

Furthermore, when it was time to deliver a financial gift, Paul traveled a thousand miles to deliver it personally to Jerusalem. These offerings would not only alleviate their suffering, but they would also demonstrate genuine concern on the part of Gentile Christians for Jewish Christians. This, in turn, would help promote unity and love among believers and help prevent the kinds of misunderstandings that were undermining the Galatian churches.

Appealing for Unity

The more we follow Paul, the more we see that his life and ministry was dedicated to building bridges. His passion for the unity of the body can be clearly heard in his appeal to the believers at Corinth to "agree with one another so that there be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought." (1 Cor 1: 10) The entire passage reads:

I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? (1 Cor 1: 10-13)

The idea of being perfectly united in mind and thought must not be understood as a call to conformity nor as advocating intolerance for diversity. Later, in 1 Corinthians

chapter 12, Paul speaks with greater clarity concerning unity in the midst of diversity. In this regard, Lowery, Walvoord and Zuck do not believe that unity undermines diversity. They go on to show that, “His (Paul’s) appeal was for harmony, not the elimination of diversity. He desired a unity of all the parts, like a quilt of various colors and patterns blended together in a harmonious whole.”³⁶ Hughes and Laney show that Paul’s main objective in writing was to address the growing factions in the church, which came as a result of “the people forming religious cliques and making them the objects of their faith rather than finding unity in the cross of Christ.”³⁷

Admittedly the line between being likeminded and exactly what represents diversity can be too much of a grey area for us. However, Paul’s emphasis in 1 Corinthians 1: 10-13 seems to be encouraging like-mindedness in spiritual matters, such as one’s allegiance to Christ and the kind of character Christians are expected to possess (Col 3:12-15; Eph 4:1-4). Since these are all behaviors that are within the believer’s control, real diversity then, may have more to do with things we do not control. Thus, while the scriptures continually challenge us to change, shaping and mold us into the image of Christ, it cannot legitimately challenge us to change our race, our ethnicity or our culture.

It bears mentioning that when the church at Jerusalem was faced with the question of what to do about Gentile converts in the church. More specifically, Hughes and Laney,

³⁶ D.K. Lowery, J. F. Walvoord, and R. B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures, 1 Corinthians*, vol. 2 (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), .508.

³⁷ R.B. Hughes and J.C. Laney, *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 547.

point out that, “The church was faced with the question, is a Gentile acceptable to God without becoming a Jew”³⁸

Here was an issue over which Jewish leaders and Gentile believers could not see eye-to-eye. The starting point for each group was entirely different. The Gentiles shared no common ground with Jews with respect to worship, except that they had all been saved by His grace (Acts 15:8-11). However, since it was evident that God was at work among the Gentiles, it seemed good to them to allow the Spirit of God to work on those areas of their identity necessary to bring them into conformity to the image of Christ and leave what could not be changed - their ethnicity.

The Spirit-led response of the apostles demonstrated their respect for the racial, cultural, and ethnic identity of the believers in question. Refusing to hold up Jewish traditions as the template for salvation or for how the Gentiles should live out their faith, their response was rendered thusly: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.” (Acts 15: 28-29)

Thus diversity in how we express ourselves culturally in worship, how we fellowship with each other, and even how we put into practice our doctrinal perspectives can be a source of enrichment and should be encouraged, insofar as these things do not breed a spirit of competition and elitism within the body.

³⁸ Hughes and Laney, *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary*, 510.

Those self-made categories like the ones by which these Corinthian believers were attempting to identify themselves should not be accepted as legitimate expressions of diversity, as it is clear from this that these only serve to divide the church. It is evident that this was the case with the church at Corinth, and hence why Paul dealt with it so authoritatively— **in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ** (1 Cor 1: 10).

In eradicating these factions, Paul refocuses the church on the centrality of the cross. This focus on the cross was his way of reminding them that Christ alone was the source of their salvation and not any of the various leaders who had preached the gospel to them. Hence he asks the questions: Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul (1 Cor. 1:13)?

Paul's actions demonstrate that he is a true apostle, building upon the foundations previously laid by Jesus Christ. For it was Christ who first, inaugurated this unity among his apostles (John 17:11, 21-23, and second, pointed to the danger of a house divided when he said: "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand." (Matt 12:25) Paul knew that a fledgling Corinthian church could not have been able to stand had these forces dividing it been allowed to go unchecked.

Maintaining the Unity of the Spirit

Finally, we explore Paul's exhortation to the church at Ephesus to "Keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph 4:3). The passage of Ephesians 4:1-5 reads:

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one

another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit - just as you were called to one hope when you were called - one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

H.W. Hoehner, J. F. Walvoord, and R. B. Zuck, in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* make a notable observation when they say, “Christians are not to make unity but to keep or guard what God made in creating the “one new man” (Eph 2:15–16). They are to keep this unity “through the bond” which consists of peace. Concern for peace will mean that Christians will lovingly tolerate each other, even when they have differences.”³⁹

We may conclude from Paul’s statement that the starting point for any bridge-builder is to recognize that it is not up to them to create unity, but rather to maintain it. Towards that end, we may do the following: (1) We may further unity, (2) we may foster unity, or (3) we may encourage unity. Closely related to unity is the idea of peace. Hence, we are encouraged to make peace that which maintains our bond with one another. When peace is our bond, disagreements and differences do not lead to divisions. Seeking to preserve peaceful relations with each other motivates us to lovingly bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances (Col 3:13) we may have against one another.

As H.W. Hoehner et al, have shown, Jesus inaugurated that unity by breaking down the middle wall of partition that existed between Jew and Gentile, making us into one new man (Eph 2:15). Then, more so than now, the issue of unity between Jew and Gentile was of relevance within the Church. Thus, it was needful for Jewish believers, in particular, to have a proper understanding of their new identity and position in the kingdom of God that was no longer based on any previous sense of exclusiveness and

³⁹ H.W. Hoehner, J. F. Walvoord, and R. B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures, Ephesians*, vol. 2 (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), 633.

separation from others. The “new man,” rather, shares a common identity with all who claim Jesus as Lord.

Paul outlines the following seven key points of identification: (1) Identification with the body. “**One body**” is clearly a reference to the universal church of which we as believers are all a part. (2) Identification with the Spirit. **One Spirit**, which refers to the Holy Spirit who indwells the Church. (3) Identification in our hope. “**One hope**,” indicating that all believers share a common hope – possibly a reference to the eschatological hope. (4) Identification with Christ. “**One Lord**” is clearly a reference to Christ, our head. (5) Identification in the faith. “**One faith**” may be speaking more of a subjective rather than an objective faith, which all Christians have towards God because of our new positioning in Christ. (6) Identification in baptism.

One baptism seems to be a reference to water baptism (Rom 6:1-11; Gal 3:27). Thus baptism is yet another way in which believers not only identify with Christ, but with one another. (7) Identification with the Father. “**One God and Father of us all...**” This is clearly a reference to God, the Father. Regarding this, Hoehner *et al*, go on to say that, “God is the Father “of” all who believe; they are His children (John 1:12; Gal. 3:26). He is “over” all them as their Sovereign. He lives “through” them and manifests Himself “in” them.”⁴⁰

The point to be taken from these seven points of identification is that we have been perfectly, one would even suggest inextricably, joined together by God, and in far deeper ways than we may care to understand. Christ has not only broken down the middle

⁴⁰ Hoehner, et al., eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 633.

wall of separation, he has once and for all leveled the playing field. Conversion places us all on equal footing.

This thesis-project advances the idea that both pride and ignorance are major culprits in fostering division within the Church. It is clear from the gospels and from the apostle Paul's teaching that believers possess much more in common than they have differences. Unity is best fostered when this fact is not only known but also celebrated.

The Church as a Living System

In 1 Corinthians 12:12-30, according to Hughes and Laney, "Paul used the human body to illustrate how the church was to function - with a unified diversity of gifts."⁴¹ It follows the earlier section in which Paul talked about the diversity of gifts present within the Church. His main purpose was to assist the Corinthian church with their struggle to live with diversity while remaining unified and cohesive as a body. 1 Corinthians 12: 12-13 reads: "The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink." The Corinthians, it would seem, held to the notion that unity meant that they each needed to seek after the same gifts. Thus when we look at the Church as a living system – rich with complexity and diversity - it is easy to see the usefulness of Paul's body analogy.

⁴¹ Hughes and Laney, *Tyndale Concise Bible*, 556.

Anthony Thiselton in *1 Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral*

Commentary speaks appropriately to this when he points out, “Only in the church as a community of diverse individuals who bring diverse gifts for the mutual building up of all can anyone witness and experience the rich fullness of the many gifts of the Holy Spirit.”⁴² Here Paul is attempting to dispel the misconceptions held by the Corinthians as it pertained to the value of the gifts. His goal: to preserve the unity of the church.

Thus, by pointing to the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12: 13) he demonstrates not only the universal spiritual connection that all believers share— being one body— but also makes it clear that the Spirit alone (as the Source) determines the value of the gift. As Hughes and Laney shows concerning the gifts, “The worth is dictated by source, not function (1 Cor 12:15–26). Membership in God’s community is not based on the type of gift he has given.”⁴³ Thus the rich fullness of the many gifts are intended to function in cohesive harmony with each other, not independent of each other. Also, Hughes and Laney note that “The nature of the church demands a variety that leads to interdependence and appreciation, not schism.”⁴⁴

If we broaden our thinking on diversity, then Paul’s argument may be applicable to denominational traditions, ethnic churches, and a plethora of distinctives that too often form the basis for our justifying isolation from others. While this thesis-project is clearly in favor of cultural and other expressions of diversity, the challenges they present in fostering unity are not to be underestimated. It is clear from what took place in Acts 6

⁴² Anthony C. Thiselton, *1 Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 212.

⁴³ Hughes and Laney, *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary*, 556.

⁴⁴ Hughes and Laney, *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary*, 557.

that culture and language can either be powerful points of connection or strong forces for division, irrespective of race. Acts 6:1-2 reads “In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.”

This was clearly an open dispute among Jews who had come to faith in Christ. However, one group, the Hebraic Jews of Jerusalem, began to show favor to their own to the neglect of the Grecian Jews of Diaspora. While this may have been primarily due to the fact that the Grecian Jews were thought of as strangers, the element of racial prejudice cannot be ignored. Hughes and Laney confirm, “The heart of the problem was racial tension over the daily ration of food for widows.”⁴⁵ Thus while the neglect of widows was clearly in violation of the biblical mandate to care for the widows, this was also an act of prejudice against the Grecian Jewish believers.

One can see in this incident how easily lines of separation can be drawn between different groups within the church based on race and ethnicity. People seem more naturally bent towards highlighting differences than in celebrating similarities. In *Linking Arms Linking Lives*, the writers Ronald J. Sider, John M. Perkins, Wayne L. Gordon, and F. Albert Tizon make a point of saying, “The church today needs to strive in the Spirit to be that multiclass, multiracial kingdom community that by its very existence challenges the many divisions that exist in the world.”⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Hughes and Laney, *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary*, 502.

⁴⁶ Ronald J. Sider, John M. Perkins, Wayne L. Gordon, and F. Albert Tizon, *Linking Arms, Linking Lives: How Urban-Suburban Partnerships Can Transform Lives* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 96, Kindle.

The problem may have been material or racial, but the real problem was how this conflict could have kept the apostles from focusing on their ministry of praying, preaching, and spreading the gospel. Thus their response to the problem should be noted. Their decision was to select “spirit filled men” to take on the responsibility was interesting, in that, according to Hughes and Laney, “the names of the men chosen to mediate this racial problem (6:5) indicate that these men were of Greek or Hellenistic backgrounds. The deacons were chosen from among the Hellenistic Christians to balance the representation of the two groups (Hellenistic and Judaistic) in leadership.”⁴⁷

This incident also shows us that a way in which unity can be preserved while allowing diversity to flourish is through the principle of representation. Rather than allow the Grecian Jews to continue being mistreated, the apostles chose to increase the diversity among the ranks of the leadership, giving the demographic who were considered the minority better representation.

In Thiselton’s commentary on 1 Corinthians 12, he invites us to reflect upon Paul’s body analogy in the following ways: (1) If Christians are the limbs (members) of Christ, then to sin against one another is the same as sinning against Christ. (2) To consider that the weak are actually honorable and respected parts of the body, as opposed to the conventional understanding about mutual interdependence. (3) Those with special gifts (considered strong) should be challenged to not think of themselves as possessing all

⁴⁷ Hughes and Laney, *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary*, 503.

that the body needs. (4) Baptism is a sign of Christian unity; because of the Spirit, all Christians are initiated through baptism into a common allegiance to Christ as Lord.⁴⁸

Certainly Thiselton's insightful commentary on this passage helps us to see with greater clarity the many ways in which we are joined one to another and how we may better relate to each other despite our differences; this is a point, which, as we have seen, harmonizes well with the teachings of the apostle Paul. Additionally, seeing the church as a living system provides us with a proper framework from which to understand the relationship between diversity and unity, as it would appear from the Corinthians' mental model, the two were mutually exclusive.

In Douglas Hall's article *Christian Applications to Systems Thinking*, a discussion on the need for us to find and use appropriate mental models, he states that, "We can easily focus upon highly defined single 'parts,' but the very dynamic "whole" is often in its great complexity invisible to us, especially when we have an 'additive' mental model."⁴⁹ What Hall was describing there was the interrelatedness of churches within the city and why it is necessary for us to think more deeply on our connectedness, as it has strong implications for avoiding counter productivity in ministry. He goes on to say, "Christianity in the city is an interrelated system, and the Christian in a city is related ultimately to all other Christians in the world."⁵⁰

It is clear then, that in order to forge strong, long-lasting partnerships that somehow reflect the example established for us by the Godhead, our mental models must

⁴⁸ Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 211.

⁴⁹ Hall, Douglas, "Christian Application to Systems Thinking." (Unpublished PDF, May 15, 2015), 23

⁵⁰ Hall, "Christian Applications to Systems Thinking," 23.

be challenged and brought into greater harmony with reality. Currently, the Church seems mired in Greco-Roman thinking: the mental model which tends to mostly appreciate and celebrate the strongest leaders, the most charismatic gifts, and the largest churches.

While this thesis-project is in favor of prominent churches using their visibility and strength to influence and bring leaders together, experience has shown that this does not always happen. Whereas prominence and visibility are great potentials to possess, absent of serious intent and a right understanding of the body they are like clouds that produce no rain.

Equally important to this discussion is the mistake that prominent leaders often make by attempting to forge partnerships based purely on their “celebrity status” without a serious commitment to first building relationships. This may fit into the category of what Douglas Hall refers to as “stinkin thinkin,” only in a slightly different context. Such presumptions often lead to failure.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the smaller, lesser-known churches thinking they have nothing to offer and choosing not to initiate or participate in any partnership building. Such actions are analogous to the foot saying, “Because I am not the hand, I am not a part of the body”...or the ear saying, “Because I am not the eye, I do not belong to the body” (1 Cor 12:15-16).

D. A. Carson, R.T. France, J.A. Motyer and G.J. Wenham's *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition* state that, “In secular Corinth the elite paraded their gifts and abilities believing that it was these that gave them status and significance. This

false notion appears, in some cases, still to exist after conversion and while persons were involved in ministry.”⁵¹

Since this is not the behavior that believers are encouraged to engage in, Paul challenges the conventional Greco-Roman ideas about independence that were the main cultural influences shaping the Corinthians’ mental model. Instead he advances the idea of interdependency. This means that even the lesser parts of the body - the parts which are often invisible - are of equal importance, and as such should be given equal honor.

Through the lens of systems thinking, Paul invites us to see the difference between “detail complexity” and “dynamic complexity.” The former acknowledges the body in all its complexity and the basic function of its many members. The latter, however, understands the relationship of each part to the other, as he goes on to show. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you! On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.” (1 Cor 12:21-22)

Paul’s message is an important consideration for leaders of smaller churches as it pertains to fostering this culture of unity and cooperation. One should never believe that he/she does not matter so as to count one’s self out based of the size of one’s gift or congregation. The presence and labor of love of each church within its community is a faithful witness of God’s presence among the people. Thus, to count one’s self out or to refuse participation in partnerships on such basis would be considered an insult to the Holy Spirit who gives each believer gifts for the benefit of the whole body.

⁵¹ D.A. Carson, et al., *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, 4th ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsityPress Books, 1994), 1180.

Conclusion and Summary

As we have seen from the passages examined in this chapter, the ideas of church cooperation, partnership building, and fostering a culture of unity are rooted in scripture. They are not in any way to be considered a novel concept. Taking our model and injunctions from God, the Creator; Adam, the first vice regent of the earth; all who have been redeemed by Christ, the Last Adam, partnerships that foster the spirit of unity are the normal way in which God's children are expected to live, love and work.

Most salient among the ideas proposed in this chapter for our consideration is that which draws upon the finished work of the Holy Spirit in making us one. In the words of Dr. Lloyd-Jones, "This unity is essentially spiritual, is produced by the operation of the Holy Spirit in regeneration, and shows itself in a common belief and reception of the teachings of our Lord's Person and work."⁵² It is the goal of this thesis to advance these ideas to the extent that others desiring to foster unity might give serious consideration to the reality that we are already one. All that is necessary on our part is to simply learn to love and accept one another, despite how we may be different. In the words of the apostle Paul: "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." (Eph 4:4–6)

We do well to remember the words of Jesus who says, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not

⁵² David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Basis of Christian Unity* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust Publishing, 2003), 14.

stand.” (Matt 12:25) Thus, if we should ignore the Master’s words and continue in our present culture of isolation and indifference toward each other, what will become of the church? Better still, what will be the plight of the nations that we are called to disciple?

CHAPTER THREE

Introduction to the Literature Review

The subject of church partnerships is one that has become of great interest lately within the wider evangelical circle. The bulk of the literature on partnerships in recent publications is a clear indication of that growing interest. The author has selected only seven scholars' writings below for the limited purpose of this study. The following is a review of literature that ties the scholarship of this thesis to the broader literary context. The ideas and concepts generated by these writers inform the conceptual framework as well as the foundational context.

Any research undertaken in the area of church cooperation requires an exploration of other closely related themes. The literature has been carefully chosen based on how these writers ideas and concepts inform these related themes and is categorized as follows: 1) The Unity of the Church, 2) Living Systems Ministry, 3) Pastoral Leadership, and 4) Kingdom Partnerships. Among them are, *The Basis of Christian Unity* by David Martyn Lloyd-Jones; *Your Church is Too Small: Why Unity in Christ's Mission Is Vital to the Future of the Church* by John H. Armstrong; *The Cat and the Toaster: Living System Ministry in a Technological Age* by Douglas A. Hall, Judy Hall and Steve Daman; *The Fifth Discipline: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization* by Peter M. Senge; *Churches Partnering Together: Biblical Strategies for Fellowship, Evangelism, and Compassion* by Chris Bruno and Matt Dirks; *A Prayer for the City* by Eldin

Villafane; and *Linking Arms Linking Lives : How Urban-Suburban Partnerships Can Transform Communities* by Ron Sider, John Perkins, Wayne Gordon and Albert Tizon.

Any conversation about church unity and cooperation will always raise questions about doctrine. Can there be any meaningful partnerships with others who believe differently? Among evangelicals there are many divergent schools of thought about the faith. We have Calvinists, Arminians, Trinitarians, Unitarians and those who emphasize the Oneness of God; we have dispensationalists and those who hold to the historical interpretation; we have cessationists and Charismatics. We may also add to that list the growing number of church leaders who have shifted from the biblical view of traditional marriage to the liberal position of embracing same-sex marriage. And still, this may only be the tip of the iceberg in terms of identifying our points of division.

There is little doubt that these doctrinal differences can dampen any fellowship and hinder any effort to forge partnerships among churches. Yet, there can be no cross-denominational partnerships unless there is some way to work around it all. Hence the question that emerges is: Which comes first, fellowship or doctrine?

The Basis of Christian Unity

One of the strong themes of this thesis is that of Christian unity. In his book *The Basis of Christian Unity*, renowned late Welsh Evangelical Preacher and teacher, David Martyn Lloyd-Jones¹ delivered a lucid examination of two key New Testament passages, John 17 and Ephesians 4. This was done in his address to the Westminster Fellowship on

¹ David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Basis of Christian Unity* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2003).

Christian Unity (June, 1962). His central thesis is that the basis of Christian unity is the result of a shared faith in Christ and his gospel.

From the text of John 17, Lloyd-Jones extrapolates three main principles. The first is that the people who are the subject of the unity that Jesus is praying for, whom he designates as ‘these’, are a certain people who belong to God. These are people whom God, the Father, has given to Jesus, and for whose sake he came into the world. They are those who have received his word, and particularly his teaching concerning himself. They have known whom he is and that he is sent by God.

The second principle is the origin of unity. He shows that Christ inaugurated Christian unity when he called his disciples to himself. Lloyd-Jones establishes that as Christ’s disciples, we are not called to produce unity but rather to recognize that “the unity is already there, already in existence. It is the unity of those, who in contradistinction to all others have believed the truth concerning him and his work.”²

The third principle he examines in verses 20-23 has to do with the nature of Christian unity. This unity, he describes as an essence of being. In much the same way that the Father, Son and Spirit are one in their divine essence, the Christian man who is ‘born again’, ‘born of the Spirit’, a ‘partaker of the divine nature’, is one with those who have been baptized into the body of Christ with one Spirit. He closes this teaching on the gospel of John by stating that: “There is no unity at all in our Lord’s sense apart from this fundamental operation of the Holy Spirit of God, who creates within the believers of the

² Lloyd-Jones, *The Basis of Christian Unity*, 10.

truth this new nature. And that in turn leads, by the same analogy, to an identity of view, of object, of love, and so on.”³

His description of the nature of Christian unity as a ‘spiritual essence’, coupled with the implications of sameness of identity and view, provide some important considerations going forward, as the author seeks to foster unity and cooperation among pastors in his region for the purpose of building partnerships. From the text of Ephesians 4, Lloyd-Jones addresses one of the fundamental questions this thesis asks, and that is whether doctrine alone forms the basis for unity, or can leaders coalesce around a shared vision for their community.

Lloyd-Jones also shows that Christian unity is the result of the Spirit’s work, and hence the use of the term ‘the unity of the Spirit’. Since Christian unity is spiritual in its essence, and, by extension, the work of the Spirit, the only thing we are capable of or responsible for is the maintaining of that unity. For Lloyd-Jones, the starting point in considering the question of unity must always be grounded in two main criteria: The regeneration and a belief in the truth – a point which is liberally restated throughout his thesis. Lloyd-Jones further points out that,

An appearance or a façade of unity based on anything else, and at the expense of these two criteria, or anything ignoring them is clearly a fraud and a lie. People are not one, nor have unity, nor in a state of unity who disagree about fundamental questions such as...our submission to revealed truth, the state of man’s sinfulness and the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.⁴

Thus for Lloyd-Jones, the answer is an emphatic yes! Belief in the fundamental truths of scripture is the only starting point for Christian unity. To elucidate this point,

³ Lloyd-Jones, *The Basis of Christian Unity*, 13.

⁴ Lloyd-Jones, *The Basis of Christian Unity*, 72

Lloyd-Jones drew reference to the early church, whose pattern of behavior in the book of Acts established this precedent: “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). It was their devotion to the apostles’ doctrine that formed the basis for their unity and fellowship.

Because Dr. Lloyd-Jones thesis was written in a time when ecumenism was gaining momentum, clear lines needed to be drawn in order to “preserve the unity of the Spirit”⁵ within the orthodoxy of the Christian faith. Thus the driving force behind his work was to show that Christian unity was not something arrived at by ignoring or minimizing truth. For him, a shared faith in Jesus and unwavering adherence to the doctrine of the apostles was the only basis for true fellowship.

The author finds Lloyd-Jones’s emphasis on belief in the fundamental truths particularly helpful in these times where inclusion, the postmodern version of ecumenism, is the spirit of the age that drives our culture. The author has already faced questions from non-church leaders as to why his efforts to build partnerships within the community do not include the local synagogues and mosques.

Your Church is Too Small

John H. Armstrong is a former pastor and church planter who currently serves as president of Acts 3, a ministry for equipping leaders for unity in Christ’s mission.⁶ In his

⁵ Lloyd-Jones, *The Basis of Christian Unity*, 72.

⁶ John Armstrong, “Are You Ready to Become an Empowered Missional-Ecumenist?,” ACT3 Network, accessed September 14, <http://act3network.com/info/our-story/>.

book, *Your Church is Too Small: Why Unity in Christ's Mission is Vital to the Future of the Church*, he engages the issue of doctrinal conformity. The book is divided into three sections.

In the first section, Armstrong looks at the past, and titles the section: “The Biblical and Historical Basis for Christian Unity.”⁷ Armstrong’s argument for this section is simply that the road to the future must run through the past. It is both descriptive of his personal journey and development, and of the formation of the Church from its infancy until present.

As to his personal journey, Armstrong describes three life-changing conversions he has experienced. The first was his coming to faith as a boy back in 1956. The second came while working as a church planter following college. This conversion was more of a theological nature, which took place when he came into an understanding of the message of divine sovereignty. The third conversion came during Sunday worship while reciting the Apostle’s Creed in 1995. It was this third conversion which brought him to a deeper understanding of the prayer of Jesus’ prayer in John 17:20-23. It was there that his love for the Church and his vision for unity increased.

In his examination of the historical Church, Armstrong shows that the nascent Church was initially mired in disunity. Paul’s Corinthian letters bear ample witness to this reality (1 Cor 1:10; 3:1-22), and (Gal 5:19-21) where he addresses life in the Spirit. Among the works of the flesh outlined in that section you will find discord, dissensions and factions.

⁷ John H. Armstrong, *Your Church is Too Small: Why Unity in Christ's Mission is Vital to the Future of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 16

Citing Paul's quarrel with Peter over the issue of how to properly assimilate Gentile believers into the body of Christ, Armstrong shows how this disunity was even among the leaders themselves. However, "despite disagreements on points of doctrine, the New Testament as well as the subsequent post-apostolic records reveal that there was still a deep commitment among the leaders to preserve the unity of the church as one family."⁸ Armstrong's observations of church history coupled with his interpretation of John 17:20-23 can provide the author with a roadmap going forward as he finds himself working against rampant disunity and diverse doctrinal and philosophical issues in his ministry context.

In the second section Armstrong addresses the present and titles it: "Restoring Unity in the Church Today."⁹ He begins by asking the question: How can we restore unity? Here Armstrong makes a case for a return to the Apostle's Creed as a unifying instrument for the Church. He recalls, "The creed was confessed in one's baptism, affirmed regularly by the whole gathered church, and openly used to express the kind of essential Christianity that united all believers."¹⁰

Citing Phillip Schaff, J. T. Muller and W. G. T. Shedd, whose thoughts help to sum up the value of the creeds, he leaves us with the understanding that the Apostle's Creed is a dynamic treasure. And, when we fail to use it as a basic guide for teaching the essentials of our faith, we practically invite disunity. Besides the lack of unity, Armstrong

⁸ Armstrong, *Your Church is Too Small*, 35.

⁹ Armstrong, *Your Church is Too Small*, 35-36.

¹⁰ Armstrong, *Your Church is Too Small*, 36.

sees the Evangelical Church's departure from a creedal understanding of catholicity as a contributing factor to the smallness of the Church.

This section is a further outline of some of the causes of disunity. Among disunity are sectarianism, which he defines as seeking unity in uniformity rather than in diversity, and expecting Christians to fully comply as a pre-requisite for fellowship. Armstrong also examines Christian tradition and the new ecumenism, an organic movement in which the Holy Spirit is drawing Christians together for prayer, service and mission.

This movement is not marked by the sectarianism of past movements, but rather is marked by the fact that diversity is celebrated as Christians realize that they are all a part of the same household of faith. Particularly encouraging to the author is Armstrong's statement that "the church is coming together in new expressions of unity and diversity. This is happening through the work of the Holy Spirit...This new expression is shaped by mission and ecumenism."¹¹ This helps the author to see that his work is grounded in the broader context of the universal body of Christ. Most importantly, it reminds the author that this is the work of the Holy Spirit in this present age.

The third section deals with the future and is titled: "The Missional Ecumenical Movement."¹² Here questions about whether denominationalism and catholicity can coexist are engaged. Also addressed in this section are questions as to which church is the true church. While Armstrong does not see Protestant denominations as necessarily harmful, he does see them as a part of the problem noting that, "while they may help us

¹¹ Armstrong, *Your Church is Too Small*, 140.

¹² Armstrong, *Your Church is Too Small*, 140.

pursue obedience to the mission of Christ, we ought to recognize that there is more to our unity than these structures.”¹³

On the surface, Armstrong appears more liberal where doctrine as a basis for unity is concerned, when juxtaposed with Lloyd-Jones. But his ideas are better appreciated when one understands that they were written to encourage more expressions of unity in the body of Christ. As such, his primary challenge is not so much to defend the faith, not that he falls short of doing so, but more to promote unity within the faith. In Armstrong’s view, the idea that we must all agree on doctrine as a requisite for fellowship is narrow, and in his view harms the mission of Christ because “it spreads the seeds of sectarianism and forces us to choose our friends and enemies based on whether or not we are in complete agreement with one another on specific matters of doctrine.”¹⁴

Using the John 17 text, Armstrong introduces what he believes to be the unity that Jesus prayed for, and a unity that is clearly more attainable. He shows this to be a relational unity, much like the one that Jesus had with the Father. Such unity, he argues, can be attained without doctrinal uniformity or compromising truth. In his words, “relational unity with Christ should lead us to embrace a co-operational unity with other Christians... cooperation is not the same as compromise.”¹⁵

Armstrong’s understanding of unity creates for the author a healthy tension with that of Lloyd-Jones. It speaks to why fostering unity among pastors should be approached with an informed, open mind. The seemingly divergent schools of thought that emerge

¹³ Armstrong, *Your Church is Too Small*, 141.

¹⁴ Armstrong, *Your Church is Too Small*, 50.

¹⁵ Armstrong, *Your Church is Too Small*, 53.

from these well-respected theologians is an example of how our cultural context and experiences informs our theology.

It remains to be seen, in the end, which perspective on unity will influence the author's actions more as he works to foster unity among pastors in his region. However, the author does see how what Armstrong has put forth can provide a framework and an approach to unity where truth is not compromised and the emphasis is placed on relational cooperation. Agreeing on the fundamentals is not the greatest challenge to achieving unity since sectarianism is rarely ever about fundamental truths.

Rather, it is about those other 'secondary doctrines' that form the basis for sectarianism and the creation of denominations. Armstrong's approach is one that allows for diversity, while seeking common ground around shared beliefs. And, in the end this may end up being the most realistic definition of the kind of unity we should pursue.

The Fifth Discipline

In his book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Business Organization*, Peter M. Senge lays out specific learning skills and disciplines that are designed to help build learning organizations. Each discipline is powerful in and of itself, but when applied in combination with the rest, they are able to deliver exponentially better results than could be achieved individually as "systems thinking needs the disciplines of building shared vision, mental models and personal mastery to realize its

potential.”¹⁶ It is a layman’s introduction to systems thinking, a science exclusively practiced among those in the industry. For the author, the very nature of systems thinking requires a fundamental shift of the mind for those wanting to become proficient practitioners.

Although primarily written for businesses and governments, the disciplines of systems thinking can be applied to any type of organization. As the author presses forward with the effort to foster a culture of unity among pastors in his region, he can readily see how some of these principles will revolutionize his church as well as to help build better partnerships. At this juncture the author will give a brief synopsis of each discipline and show how they relate to his thesis-project.

The first is Systems Thinking. Senge defines systems thinking as “a way of seeing wholes. It is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static snapshots.”¹⁷ It is a body of knowledge and tools that have been developed over the past fifty years, to make the full pattern clearer, and help us to see how to change them effectively. When we are thinking systemically, we are able to see how everything is connected like overlapping circles that depend upon and interact with one another, as opposed to viewing things in a linear, systematic and non-related way.

Senge employs the analogy of a rainstorm to further elucidate this point. A rainstorm is best understood when viewed as a system. As such, it is comprised of time, space, water, winds, clouds and temperature. To focus on understanding the chemical

¹⁶ Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Business Organization* (New York: Doubleday Publishing, 2006), 12.

¹⁷ Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 68.

composition of the water alone, for example, would not help one understand the rainstorm as a system. Seeing the major interrelationships underlying a problem leads to new insights into what might be done.

Understanding this discipline will help the author to approach partnership building with a better understanding of how each church within the region, though unique in its philosophical approach, contributes to the spiritual and social eco-system of the city. In addition, it helps the author to understand some of the complexities associated with building kingdom partnerships with others.

The second discipline is *Personal Mastery*. According to Senge, personal mastery is:

The discipline of personal growth and learning... When personal mastery becomes a discipline – and activity we incorporate into our lives – it embodies two underlying movements. The first is clarifying what is important to us... the second is continually learning how to see current reality more clearly. In moving toward a desired destination, it is vital to know where you are now.¹⁸

The essence of personal mastery is learning how to create and sustain personal tension in our lives. It is a way of learning that surpasses the mere gathering of information and expands our ability to produce the results we truly desire.

This discipline is important on a personal level as well as to this thesis. On a personal level it helps the author to clarify what is most important in seeking out relationships and in building partnerships. Working with pastors is about learning to respect the personal agendas of everyone, while at the same time keeping the main thing, the main thing.

¹⁸ Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 141- 42.

The third discipline is Mental Models. Mental models are “deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures and images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action.”¹⁹ Mental models are powerful in affecting what we do because, in part, they affect what we see. They may be simple generalizations such as, “people are untrustworthy”²⁰ or complex theories, such as one’s assumptions about why people in church behave as they do.

Mental models explain why two different individuals can observe the same event and describe it differently because they are each focused on different details. Senge suggest that, “the problem with mental models lie not in whether they are right or wrong... the problems with mental models arise when the models are tacit– when they exist below the level of awareness.”²¹ Understanding mental models will prove helpful to this thesis-project. Each leader brings his own understanding of Church, partnerships and ministry to the table based on his/her mental models. Knowing this will undoubtedly help the author forage through the clutter as we work towards clarifying our highest purpose as a group.

The fourth principle is Building a Shared Vision. A shared vision is the capacity of people to hold shared pictures in their minds of the future they are trying to create. The challenge is to allow a full picture or fragments of it to exist in others without violating the whole vision. Senge noted that, “in a corporation, a shared vision changes people's relationship with the company. It is no longer 'their company' it becomes 'our company'". A shared vision is the first step in allowing people who mistrusted each other to begin to

¹⁹ Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 8.

²⁰ Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 8.

²¹ Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 176.

work together.”²² He calls this discipline “a force in people’s hearts a force of impressive power.”²³

The author can think of no better example of building a shared vision than building kingdom partnerships with other pastors and leaders who bring a variety of gifts as well as mental models to the mix. The important goal will be to elicit a greater level of ownership from each individual through the application of this principle.

The fifth and final discipline is Learning Teams. Learning teams is the process of aligning and developing the capacity of a team to create the results that they desire. It is more than having intellectual prowess and demonstrating talent. Rather it is being able to flow in a cohesive manner with others on the team in much the same way a jazz band flows together “in the groove”²⁴ of the music. According to Senge, “individuals learn all the time and yet there is no organizational learning. But if teams learn, they become a microcosm for learning throughout the organization.”²⁵ This discipline is related to the thesis topic and will be applied initially, but not exclusively, during the focus group exercise portion of this project.

These five disciplines taught by Senge are a refreshing departure from the traditional approach to organizational leadership. Nevertheless they provide an effective way forward towards building a culture of cooperation among churches that will give ownership to every church involved. That can only bode well for the author’s immediate ministry context and region.

²² Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 208.

²³ Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 206.

²⁴ Douglas Hall, Judy Hall, and Steve Daman, *The Cat and the Toaster: Living Systems Ministry in a Technological Age* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 236.

²⁵ Hall et al., *The Cat and the Toaster*, 236.

The Cat and the Toaster

In their book *The Cat and the Toaster: Living Systems Ministry in a Technological Age* Douglas Hall, Judy Hall and Steve Daman have produced what the author believes to be the manual for living systems theology, an approach to Christian ministry that recognizes the difference between cats, the world God created, and toasters, the world we create using our technology and our capacities, limited as they are. With almost a half a century of urban ministry experience under his belt, Hall et al. unveil the living systems approach to ministry wherein we are invited to see the lead role of God's larger, living social systems as powerful engines for accomplishing far more in our world than we could ever imagine. The manuscript is a treasure trove of spiritual and social revelations that all point to a more excellent approach to doing ministry in the urban context.

The book is divided into six thematic sections, which lead us from understanding our times to ultimately beginning our journey towards doing ministry within this new paradigm. Hall et al. further say that the more “we align our actions and our minds to the high-level order of living systems ministry, the more our work here on earth will reflect what heaven is about, and – amazingly – the more our activities on earth will become, not increasingly ethereal, but increasingly practical.”²⁶ There are four sections that unpack this revolutionary living systems approach to ministry. The author will now outline a few principles and show how they inform this thesis-project.

²⁶ Hall et al., *The Cat and the Toaster*, 265.

In section two of his book, the authors invite us to embrace our poverty by showing how faulty mental models can limit our effectiveness. Using Revelations 3:7 a verse that addresses the Church of Laodicea as a scriptural backdrop, a case is built for how Western mental models can limit our effectiveness to problem solving. The authors see Western Christians as particularly challenged in this area, and make the observation that “our knee jerk reaction is to use our worldly riches to try to solve problems, even the problem of declining faith. Perhaps the problem is our arrogance and self-sufficiency. We use the mental models of our culture to tell us what to do.”²⁷

Ultimately, all our efforts to solve problems using faulty mental models are subject to the law of unintended negative returns, which states that whatever we do to accomplish something has an unintended negative return that undoes what we are trying to do. All that we do, as good as it seems, can easily become part of the larger problem, because systemic problems can be caused or amplified by what we do to solve them.

In section three, we are invited to discover our wealth. That wealth consists of what Hall et al. refer to as “three redemptive treasures of gold (symbolizing our redemption), white clothing (symbolizing our being covered by Christ), and eye salve (symbolizing clarity of vision).”²⁸(Rev 3:18) Here we are introduced to the concept of redemptive thinking. Once we acknowledge that our mental models are faulty, we must repent and embrace a redemptive approach. “Redemptive thinking is when we become aware of wrong thinking, repent of wrong mental models and learn to find a new way of

²⁷ Hall, et al., *The Cat and the Toaster*, 84.

²⁸ Hall, et al., *The Cat and the Toaster*, 84.

thinking that is more in alignment with truth.”²⁹ This is the only way to break previous patterns of being victimized by the law of unintended negative returns. Redemptive thinking allows us to be more productive and less counterproductive as leaders.

Section four deals with the aligning of our actions. Hall et al., invite us to align our thoughts and actions with that of God’s. We are to move from lower-order thinking to higher-order thinking, where we are thinking and acting more in concert with how God thinks, which in turn affects our approach to problem solving. This is done when we receive the training and discipline of the Lord.

Drawing from Revelations 3:9, the authors reveal that “rebuke, discipline, earnestness and ongoing repentance are keys to both entering into and staying engaged in living systems ministry so we do not fall back into the works mentality.”³⁰ Earnest repentance will help us maintain a humble attitude in assessing our Christian activities and not return again to relying on our Western self-sufficiency.

Section five is titled: Opening Doors and is penned against the backdrop of Revelation where Jesus declares, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.” (Rev 3:20) The most salient principle that the author takes away from *The Cat and the Toaster: Living Systems Ministry in a Technological Age* and the one that has influenced his ministry practice for the past four years is the principle of positive appreciation. It challenges the author to love both his city and those who live in it. Our cities and

²⁹ Hall, et al., *The Cat and the Toaster*, 112.

³⁰ Hall et al., *The Cat and the Toaster*, 164.

communities are living systems rich with complexity that begs to be understood and appreciated.

As a practitioner, the author is challenged to engage his community with a goal to first observe. When the author patiently and carefully observes, he's not only able to identify the basic needs, but he develops a positive appreciation (a great love) for it. The value of this, according to Hall, "is that having a positive appreciation for the context in which one does ministry is a basic way to minimize counter-productivity."³¹ The model for positive appreciation is God who 'so loved the world.' (John 3:16a) This same positive appreciation can also be seen in the ministry of Jesus. "When He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd." (Matt 9:37)

A Prayer for the City

The work of distinguished urban theologian and ethicist Dr. Eldin Villafane, in *A Prayer for the City: Further Reflections on Urban Ministry* serves as a fitting reminder to us all regarding the sociological challenges of doing ministry in the urban context. His work is one in a series of urban reflections essays that was written specifically for the theological and ecclesiastical community. In it he engages some important themes against the backdrop of the apostle Paul's prayer of benediction in 2 Corinthians 13:14.

³¹ Hall, Douglas, "The Process of the Gospel: Building Healthy Relationships With Those We serve in Ministry (Unpublished article, 2010), 3

In the first section, entitled *The Spirit's Historical Project*, the themes of urban theological education and 'the politics of the spirit' are discussed against the backdrop of Paul's benedictory prayer, which forms the framework for his approach. Villafane draws upon the three main virtues mentioned in Paul's benediction, which are love, grace and fellowship, and reframes them as follows: "My vision for urban theological education thus focuses on three areas: constituency, curriculum, and community, as they are defined by the benediction's love, grace, and fellowship."³²

The love of God speaks of the global contextual love that defines the constituency of urban theological education. The grace of God speaks about the shalom that defines the urban theological curriculum, and the fellowship speaks to the partnership that defines the community of urban theological education. Stressing the importance of urban theological education, Villafane states that "a clear vision for urban theological education provides the needed perspective for enlisting and equipping a new cadre of leaders prepared to strengthen the church's witness of the gospel and to develop creative strategies for social transformation."³³

The author is in complete agreement with Villafane in regards to theological education. The author can certainly attest to how such an education continues to inform his approach to ministry, particularly when it comes to building partnerships with other churches and institutions within my community. More than anything else that the author has invested into his personal development, urban theological education is responsible for

³² Villafane, Eldin, *A Prayer for the City: Further Reflections on Urban Ministry* (Austin: AETH, 2001), 6

³³ Villafane, *A Prayer for the City*, 5.

the critical thinking skills, which serve him well in his ecumenical work with pastors. According to Villafane “globalization as ecumenism...means cooperation and understanding among churches and people with different Christian theologies in our cities.”³⁴ This is something the author’s Pentecostal upbringing did not fully prepare him for.

In the chapter on ‘Politics of the Spirit’ Villafane introduces the idea that politics is community creating life. The Church has a political agenda for God’s creation that includes, yet goes beyond, the Politics of Jesus. Further, he agrees with Yoder and Hauerwas that the Church is the central and defining political institution, and rather than attempting to depoliticize the ethical significance of Jesus’ message, we must instead ask what sort of politics is the mark of Christian discipleship. Quoting Lehman, Villafane writes, politics then for Lehman is what God is doing in the world to make and keep human life: thus, politics as community creating life.”³⁵

In the second section, he introduces, ‘Salsa Christianity,’ which he defines as “the metaphor ‘par excellence’ for Latino reality and Christianity.”³⁶ It is a fitting metaphor since salsa is an amalgamation and an interpretation of the distinct national music endemic to the African, European, and Amerindian roots of Latinos, and because it is distinctly urban in its origin. This serves as the backdrop for his essay on the Latino Church in the barrio.

In his treatment of the Latino realidad (reality), Villafane touches briefly on the pervasive influence of the Latino people, who, much like their salsa music, are showing

³⁴ Villafane, *A Prayer for the City*, 7.

³⁵ Villafane, *A Prayer for the City*. 21

³⁶ Villafane, *A Prayer for the City*, 37.

up in every venue. He points out that, “Latinos are a highly urbanized people, concentrated in the largest cities of America... every major city in the nation has a sizable population.”³⁷ In the City of New Rochelle where the author is called to serve, Latinos have already shifted the demographic to where they now comprise 27 percent of the population. And, not surprisingly, the Spanish churches are among the fastest growing churches in the city as well.

Christ’s body is one. Churches partnering for social transformation are arguably the most profound expression of that oneness and demonstration of the Reign of God over us all. Similarly, as sectarianism and divisions damage our witness and thereby hinder effective proclamation, nothing brings more credibility than the unity that is forged by the Spirit.

One may also find in Villafane’s declaration a kernel of encouragement. Those who seek to link arms with other leaders in their city to break down the walls of sectarianism can take heart in knowing that even as we struggle against the enemies of hopelessness and discouragement, Christ is reigning over us. He is the author and finisher of our faith. (Heb 12:2)

Churches Partnering Together

Pastors Chris Bruno, Matt Dirks and D. A. Carson in their book *Churches Partnering Together: Biblical Strategies for Fellowship, Evangelism and Compassion* speak specifically about building kingdom partnerships. Using as their theological

³⁷ Villafane, *A Prayer for the City*, 36.

framework the apostle Paul's work with the Gentile churches in which he labored to build partnerships to support the struggling Jewish believers in Jerusalem, Bruno et al., teach some useful truths about church partnerships. One of those important truths is that "kingdom churches, whether large or small are churches that want to build the kingdom, not their own castles; that joyfully defer their own desires in order to bless others; and eagerly partner with other congregations, setting aside secondary theological and philosophical differences as they unite in the gospel."³⁸

The book explores how churches, big and small, can partner together for the sake of the kingdom. It points smaller church leaders towards seeing possibilities for kingdom impact they might not have previously envisioned, while helping large churches see the blessing of working with smaller churches. Much of the practical guidance offered in this book grows out of the personal experience of these two pastors from working with the churches in their region.

Chris Bruno et al., define kingdom partnerships as, "a gospel-driven relationship between interdependent local churches that pray, work, and share resources together strategically to glorify God through kingdom-advancing goals they could not accomplish alone."³⁹ In chapter four they outline several characteristics of catalytic leaders, as was evident in the life of the apostle Paul.

Catalytic leaders are respected, radically dependent upon God, selflessly humble, hard workers who are passionately committed to people. They warn of several diseases that can weaken the partnerships we build. Diseases like self-dependence, despair, and

³⁸ Chris Bruno, Matt Dirks, and D. A. Carson, *Churches Partnering Together: Biblical Strategies for Fellowship, Evangelism and Compassion* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2014), 6.

³⁹ Bruno et al., *Churches Partnering Together*, Location 188, Kindle edition

impatience are some of them. It is easy to despair in the face of those needs that are too big for our church alone. No doubt, impatience is almost certain to occur when churches attempt to work together.

Invariably there will be at least one church that wants to move a little faster and at least one that tends to move a little slower. Either church is capable of becoming impatient with the other. In either case, both stand to miss out on the benefits of partnership should they lose their eternal perspective. This perspective is grounded in the understanding that we are merely “jars of clay” (2 Cor 4:7), to quote the apostle Paul.

Along those same lines, they also warn about attitudes of superiority and arrogance that larger churches can sometimes have. The author has personally witnessed what Bruno et al, describes as the ‘eye churches.’ (1 Cor 12:19-21) These are the churches with big crowds, overflowing offering plates, and charismatic leaders. They tend to look at less-gifted leaders and less-prominent churches with some measure of disdain.

Although the congregation the author leads is by no means a large one, five hundred members is somewhat above the national average. Bruno et al.’s advice serves as a word of caution since most of the churches the author interacts with fall into the category of an average sized church. On the other hand, when the author interacts with pastors of the larger churches, he must then find a way to overcome the inferiority complex that can accompany that.

Chris Bruno et al, closes out with some principles on building ownership in these partnerships. They encourage us to: 1) Avoid an atmosphere of pressure and guilt. “When you see a crying need along with a wide-open opportunity to respond, it’s easy to believe

that you'll miss the boat unless you act quickly and decisively.”⁴⁰ 2) Cultivate an atmosphere of delight in duty. Quoting John Piper they add, “There is no necessary conflict between duty and delight. It is possible to love doing what you ought to do.”⁴¹ 3) Cultivate an atmosphere of mutual praise. One of the most effective ways to do this, according the Bruno et al., is to, “praise other churches and pastors in public.”⁴² 4) Cultivate an atmosphere of openness and accountability.

According to Bruno et al., “ownership and responsibility flourish where openness and transparency are cultivated.”⁴³ The principles and ideas taught by them are in harmony with the author’s thinking as it relates to this thesis-project. Their work clarifies what a true kingdom partnership looks like and at the same time provides useful strategic insight on how to build them.

Linking Arms Linking Lives

Finally, in the book, *Linking Arms, Linking Lives: How Urban-Suburban Partnerships Can Transform Communities*, authors Ronald Sider, John Perkins, Wayne Gordon and Albert Tizon takes a five-tier approach to forging partnerships by answering questions about: 1) where we do partnerships 2) why we do partnerships 3) how we do

⁴⁰ Bruno et al., *Churches Partnering Together*, (loc. 2275, Kindle edition)

⁴¹ Bruno et al., *Churches Partnering Together*, (loc. 2276)

⁴² Bruno et al., *Churches Partnering Together*, (loc. 2276)

⁴³ Bruno et al., *Churches Partnering Together*, (loc. 2278)

and don't do partnerships 4) how others have done partnerships and, 5) how we prepare to do partnerships⁴⁴.

Combining 162 years of marital and ministry partnership, the authors speak from the perspective of having shared many rich experiences of working together. These four urban ministers include a theologian; a community organizer and reconciler; a pastor; and a missionary, and they give us a tangible witness to the very subject of their book - partnership.

Linking Arms, Linking Lives could very well be considered a cutting-edge manual for urban practitioners, as it helps us to understand the new kind of urban ministry that has come to characterize the twenty-first century. With the prevalence of gentrification that is causing many of the urban poor to be forcefully relocated to suburbia, urban ministry now has less to do with where we serve and more to do with who we serve. Twenty-first century urban ministry is serving the underclass regardless of where they live.

Furthermore, this crisis of displacement has created many opportunities for the Church. With the shift of the urban poor to the suburbs and the wealthy to the city, we no longer have the 'luxury' of tolerating each other from a safe distance. Our proximity has provided opportunity for greater dialogue and collaboration. This evolving urban-suburban landscape has even opened up discussions with some pastors of mega churches who are now concerned about having a more holistic and missional paradigm of ministry versus the old monocultural, maintenance church model.

⁴⁴ Ronald J. Sider, John M. Perkins, Wayne L. Gordon, and F. Albert Tizon, *Linking Arms, Linking Lives: How Urban-Suburban Partnerships Can Transform Lives* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 534-550, Kindle.

This book is unique in that it provides both a theological and practical framework for urban ministry, as it calls the people of God to cross socio-economic and racial divides and begin to view the world, urban and suburban and even rural, as God's domain. It challenges us as people of all "tribes and nations" (Rev 7:9) to partner together to bring the Good News to the poor (Luke 4:14-21) and marginalized.

Furthermore, this call to urban-suburban partnership is for the purpose of transforming our needy communities, not escaping from them. God does not call us to link arms and lives in order to help people leave the ghetto; he calls us together to transform the ghetto! Such a statement flies in the face of the popular notion that the answer to urban blight is to leave it. We resist this with all our strength; "with this book, we issue forth the call to partner across the urban-suburban divide in order to participate in God's transforming work, which includes a kind of gentrification without displacement, a type of community reform for the sake of its residents by the power of the gospel."⁴⁵

The insights shared in this book relate well to the focus of this thesis. The idea of urban-suburban partnerships is particularly relevant for my city in light of the growing immigrant population.

⁴⁵ Sider, et al., *Linking Arms, Linking Lives*, 534-550.

CHAPTER FOUR

Project Design

In this chapter the author employ the systems thinking methods of learning teams and the hexagon process to respond to the ministry focus of this thesis-project. The second part comprises a series of semi-structured interviews with church and marketplace leaders that are directly involved with the enterprise of church networking and partnership building on some level. The main goal of this chapter is to gather and synthesize data relating to the overall theme of this thesis-project. In the chapter that follows the author will talk about his conclusions and further implications of this thesis-project.

Learning Team

A learning team is a group that gathers to engage a common issue or purpose in order to work through that issue utilizing a common process. Our learning team was a focus group of eight people, including the moderator. The hexagon process was the way in which data was collected from the group exercise. The expectation was that once a learning team begins to work efficiently, many positive unintended consequences could come from the group's interaction around the issue. Steps were taken to ensure that each participant on the learning team understand that this was an academic exercise, one in

which each of us would be learning from the other. This for the author was one of the most obvious unintended positive consequences.

It is important to also mention the unintended negative consequences that are an ever-present part of our fallen condition as human beings. It would be irresponsible and naïve to not anticipate the possibility that negative consequences could be connected to the enterprise of church cooperation. Using a focus group as part of the learning process can be a way of mitigating those possibilities. Had time allowed, a third question would have been engaged in order to process at a deeper level what are some of the unintended negative consequences of attempting to foster unity and build partnerships. In chapter one, the author discussed briefly a situation that developed with pastors in his city over a protest the author refused to join. The author will offer his conclusions about this in the ensuing chapter. However, the two questions engaged by our learning team were:

Research questions

- 1) How can a culture of cooperation be fostered among churches that lead to partnerships in social transformation?
- 2) What are some major obstacles to fostering a culture of cooperation among churches?

The following is a brief sketch of each of the seven participants and the role they each agreed to play in the hexagon process:

Rev. Dr. Sam Vassel – Senior Pastor of Bronx Bethany Church, located in the Wakefield section of the Bronx. The church is primarily an Afro-Caribbean church with Jamaicans being the dominant group. Dr. Vassel is a member of the board of directors for Concerts of Prayer Greater NY (COPGNY), and the current Director of the Jamaica

Diaspora Day of Prayer (JDDOP), an international network of churches that partners to pray and fast for the Island of Jamaica.

Bishop Martin Nelson – Bishop Nelson is Senior Pastor of Bezer Holiness Church, located in the City of New Rochelle. Bezer is predominantly an Afro-Caribbean church, which is part of a larger network known as Bezer Holiness Churches International. Bishop Nelson serves as the Chief Prelate over the network, which has churches spanning both North America and the Caribbean.

Grant Berry – Grant Berry is a Jewish believer who heads up Messiah's House, a para-church ministry that exists to reconnect Gentile Christians to their Jewish roots. Grant's passion is to see Christians become more proactive in evangelizing the Jewish community in Westchester and beyond. His work involves partnering with local churches to raise awareness about the plight of the Jewish people.

Rev. Bejoy Samuel – Bejoy Samuel is the lead pastor of Bridge Community Church, located in Mount Vernon, NY. Bridge Community is a multicultural congregation with Indians being the largest group. Pastor Bejoy speaks from the perspective of a second-generation pastor of an ethnic church.

Rev. Dr. Orville Beckford – Dr. Beckford is the Senior Pastor of Grace New Life Center in New Rochelle. The church is a part of The Church of God of Prophecy, an international organization, which has churches in the Caribbean, Central America, USA, and the UK. He speaks from his vast experience of nearly forty years within the denomination.

Rev. Raymond Serrano – The founding Pastor of Life Together Church, located in the Throggs Neck section of the Bronx. Pastor Serrano brings the insights of a church

planter to the learning team.

Josiah Mott – The head of the marketing ministry at Family Christian Center and a member of the preaching team. Josiah agreed to participate because he brings unique insights from a millennial generation perspective.

The learning team met for a four-hour session on Friday, December 11, 2015 at Family Christian Center. To set the tone, each participant was instructed regarding the nature, and focus of the exercise, and some basic ground rules were established. The goal was to promote dialogue where a free exchange of ideas could flourish without becoming mired in unhealthy, argumentative debates and destructive and distractive discussions.

Also, participants were asked to avoid judging or challenging statements made by the others and to stay true to the hexagon process as they responded to the question of how to foster a culture of cooperation among churches.

The Hexagon Process

The hexagon process is an effective way for a learning team to brainstorm. It provides a vantage point from which to see all the individual parts of a problem in a more comprehensive fashion. This comprehensive grasp enables them to give consideration to the broader system in which it functions, thus making for more effective systemic change.

The members of the learning team were asked to review the question, and then write down their top three responses to the question: ‘How can a culture of unity and cooperation among churches be fostered that leads to partnerships for social

transformation?’ The role of the moderator was to facilitate the questions and to keep the process moving within the confines of the rules. If an answer was not clear, then the participant would be asked to clarify. This happened more frequently than not and ended up consuming some precious time. It was also difficult at times to keep the preachers from preaching. Nonetheless a spirit of camaraderie served as a buffer against any possible tension arising.

The responses were collected, numbered, and posted on a white board where everyone could see them. Simultaneously, an individual was assigned to record and number each response on a laptop to simplify data processing after the exercise. The responses to the first question are as follows:

How can we foster a culture of cooperation among churches that leads to partnership for social transformation?

1. Refocus on prayer and intercession
2. Transparent relationships
3. Deeper relationships among Pastors
4. Find like-minded Leaders
5. Flexibility and tolerance
6. Open communication
7. Get to know each other
8. Realignment of the gospel to the Jew first
9. Make the agenda the kingdom. Not personal
10. Communicate mutual benefit
11. Explore common ground

12. Focus on the bigger picture
13. Eliminate competitiveness
14. Discovering, affirming and celebrating gifts and graces
15. Promote community prayer gatherings and events to preach the gospel
16. Respecting and accepting our diversity
17. Define what the expectations of partnership are
18. Clearly stated goals
19. Learn from each other despite doctrinal differences
20. Celebrate each other genuinely
21. Explore corporate potential. Identify local predicament. Discern together what the Spirit is saying.

Once all the responses were collected and posted on the board, the next phase was to group the hexagons that were thematically related into categories. Once finished, the team assigned names to each group. The titles were intentionally given to denote an action as the response to the question on the board. The following are the five groups with their correlating hexagon numbers included.

Group 1- Build Relationships (2, 3, 4, 7, 11, 20)

- (20) Celebrate each other
- (11) Explore common ground
- (7) Get to know each other
- (4) Find likeminded leaders
- (3) Deeper relationships

(2) Transparent relationships

Group 2: Unite in Prayer

(15) Promote community prayer gatherings and events to preach the gospel

(1) Refocus on prayer and intercession

Group 3: Identify the Cause

(13) Eliminate competitiveness

(12) Focus on the bigger picture

(9) Make the agenda the kingdom—not personal

(8) Realignment of the gospel to the Jew first

Group 4: Clarify Expectations

(18) Define what the expectations of partnership are

(17) Clearly stated goals

(10) Communicate mutual benefit

(6) Open communication

Group 5: Exchange Ideas and Experience

(21) Explore corporate potential. Identify local predicament. Discern together what the Spirit is saying.

(19) Learn from each other despite doctrinal differences

(16) Respecting and accepting our diversity

(14) Discovering, affirming and celebrating gifts and graces

(5) Flexibility and tolerance

The Process of the Gospel Chart

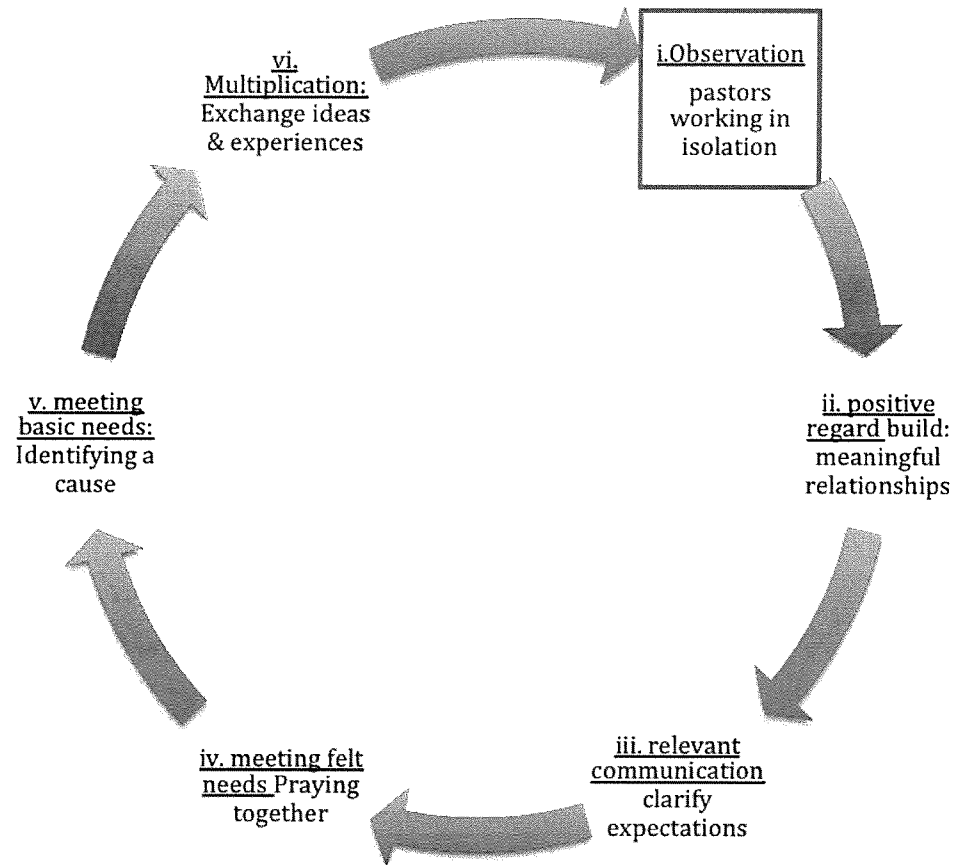


Figure 1. The Process of the Gospel Chart.

In Douglas Hall's unpublished article *The Process of the Gospel: Building Relationships with Those We Serve in Ministry*, he defines The Process of the Gospel as, "a series of steps to short-term involvement, designed to guide the process of building relationships that matter... The steps are 1) observation, 2) positive regard, 3) relevant communication, 4) meeting felt needs, 5) meeting basic needs, and 6) multiplication."¹ Hall observed that these steps are very much in agreement with the way that God engages with humanity in order to meet our deepest need. Consequently, the Process of the Gospel can have universal application in ministry and relationship building. Aligning the groupings we created after Hall's process allowed us to design a systemic approach to the problem, one that would yield greater long-term results.

When we began, the team identified the reason for disunity in the Church, and that was pastors working in isolation. Steve Fedyski refers to this as "going solo in their silo." This idea has already been developed to a fair extent in chapter one. However, in order for there to be positive regard, that is, a pastor getting to a place where they know and are known by other pastors, what was most critical was to become more intentional about building relationships.

Furthermore, these relationships were not to be the superficial, professional relationships that we are already accustomed to. Rather, they should be relationships that can be better defined as friendships. These relationships should naturally be sought after with like-minded leaders. By likeminded we mean those who share our desire for unity,

¹ Hall, Douglas, "The Process of the Gospel: Building Relationships With Those We Serve in Ministry (Unpublished article, 2010), 3

regardless of denomination, race or culture. Also, these relationships should be nurtured in a non-competitive atmosphere where pastors can comfortably relate to each other as equals.

Another key factor we discovered was the necessity for the group to clarify expectations. This may be defined as relevant communication since it is the part of the process where one gains understanding of the others. Pastors need to know exactly what they are committing to when they get into partnerships with others. It was agreed upon that clarifying with each other what they can expect from the partnership was critical to avoiding misunderstandings. Pastors should not feel guilty for expecting something in return for their commitment. It is also agreed that partnerships should be mutually beneficial. In this context, relevant communication sets the tone for pastors to work together while avoiding the disappointments that usually come from unmet expectations.

We also saw praying together as a way of meeting felt needs. If there is one thing pastors readily agree on, it is the need to pray together more and also for one another. Prayer is and should be an integral part of any partnership. Done with commitment and sincerity, prayer becomes the engine that drives the direction, vision and strategy of the partnership.

However, what we identified as the basic need was to identify a common cause. Pastors are quicker to sacrifice time and make a serious commitment when there is a specific cause for the group to rally around. We saw the ability to identify a common cause as naturally evolving out of praying together. When the cause is the result of corporate prayer, it naturally elicits a deep sense of ownership, which leads to a greater level of commitment from all involved.

Finally, we identified that learning from each other through the free exchange of ideas was one of the personal benefits of a partnership, as well as a telling marker for the trust level within the group. Since the end game is to foster a culture of unity among leaders, mutual learning experiences should increase. Learning from each other on an ongoing basis is the way to deepen trust and foster mutual acceptance. It breaks down walls and removes the fears and prejudices that are kept alive through ignorance. Once pastors experience a breakthrough in this area, the feeling is that he/she will naturally become more willing to build relationships with others outside of that circle. This is the multiplication we believe God would desire to see.

The second question we engaged was:

What are some of the major obstacles to fostering a culture of cooperation that leads to partnerships for social transformation?

1. Spiritual warfare
2. Pride and self-righteous attitudes
3. Focusing on my church and what I'm doing only
4. Not yielding to the Holy Spirit's leading
5. Culturally informed doctrinal hang-ups not grounded in scripture
6. Exclusivity - based on culture and doctrinal camps; self-satisfaction
7. Not realizing your limitations
8. Fear and suspicion of the other and the unfamiliar
9. Fear of losing flock
10. Intimidation by comparison
11. Group not inclusive enough

12. The perception of an elite group within the group; hoarding influence and controlling information
13. The perception that a person is not qualified
14. Insecurity - needing validation
15. Power struggle - “Who’s in charge?”
16. Ownership vs. stewardship - not knowing that the church is God’s
17. The co-opting and threat of principalities and powers through the fear of death. “How will this affect me?”

Our limited time did not allow for the learning team to group these responses. However, they would still play a significant role in broadening our understanding of how to foster a culture of unity.

Performing the hexagon exercise with the focus group helped to further reinforce the importance of team learning. The collective intelligence of the group yielded far more qualitative data than the author’s mind alone could have conjured up. A rewarding part of the exercise for the author was watching the team come together from the start of the exercise until the finish. In one class lecture on team building, Dr. Joseph Lombardi said that teams take roughly one to three years to form. During that period, they go through five critical stages. While the author was only with the team for a four-hour period, he was able to witness some of the dynamics of the different stages of the team building as it came together.

The first stage is FORMING, where each participant responds internally to the question, “Do I belong?” At this stage people need to know who the other members of the team are. During our hexagon exercise, it was necessary from the onset to set the

atmosphere as both a learning environment and a level playing field. The new pastors in the group were clearly wrestling with whether or not they had anything to offer.

The second stage is STORMING. This is the conflict stage where it is important to create an atmosphere where people can freely voice their objections or ask questions. Our group was no exception to the rule, as it took us roughly into the third hour to get beyond the occasional rebuttals and objections to the responses others would give. Although they were asked up front, and had all agreed to refrain from this, the little skirmishes seemed almost unavoidable.

The third stage is NORMING. When guidelines are established and roles are clarified it leads to conformity, and learning begins. The learning team had already listened to the ground rules and agreed to abide by them. For our group, the norming stage came about after repeated reminders about the rules. During this portion of the exercise, two latecomers arrived. However, they were asked to refrain from participating because it was necessary to preserve the chemistry the group was beginning to develop.

In Dr. Lombardi's lecture,² he mentioned that new team members could completely disrupt the chemistry of a team. And regaining that chemistry can sometimes take as much time as it took to build the original team chemistry. Because the latecomers had missed the first, most critical portion of the exercise where the ground rules were laid, it was right for the moderator to ask them to sit it out.

The fourth stage is PERFORMING. This is where execution takes place and a team is able to accomplish the objectives determined, and the results achieved by the

² Joseph Lombardi, DMin Residency Lecture in the course "Building Teams," CUME Boston, MA., January 17, 2011.

team are demonstrated. By the time the group completed grouping the hexagons from the first question, the team seemed to suddenly begin to get a better grasp of what was happening. This was clearly evidenced by the level of efficiency with which the group was able to engage the second question. The fifth and final stage is TERMINATING. Every team comes to an end once they have either reached their goal or due to other shifts that take place.

One of the unintended positive consequences that came from the exercise was the overwhelming level of appreciation each participant expressed for having been a part of the process. One of the participants requested the author's assistance using the hexagon process to help him sort out some of his own organizational issues; this was a clear sign that he had learned something from the process.

Interviews

The following is a series of semi-structured interviews with ministry practitioners who are involved with the enterprise of networking and partnership building at some level. They include leaders of denominations, national and global apostolic networks, para-church organizations, and marketplace type partnerships. The main criterion for the subjects interviewed was that they had to be Christian leaders involved with building partnerships with other, mainly, but not exclusively, Christian entities. These interviews were done in order to gather additional information

The first three interviews were done while attending the International Coalition of Apostolic Leaders (ICAL) yearly conference in Dallas, Texas. The occasion afforded the

author an opportunity to learn from church and marketplace leaders from across the country and world. And, while this thesis-project is about building partnerships in the authors' local context, he also took the time to interview one South-African based network leader who has churches in North America as well.

Interview with Tony Fitzgerald

Tony Fitzgerald heads up an organization known as Church of the Nations (COTN.org). During a prayer time in 1978, a seed was planted in Fitzgerald's heart for what has become Church of the Nations (COTN). The focus was to create ministry hubs that would win, train and send people to places where the hurting would be healed, the captives freed, and lives would be restored to live in the destiny God had purposed for them. These ministry hubs were to serve other centers so that multiplication could take place.

Over time their organization's vision evolved, and by 1979 the focus was shifted towards the planting and establishing of local churches. In September 1979 their first church, Abundant Life Ministries, was established in England. Abundant Life Ministries became the foundation of what is now COTN. After a decade of church planting, an international conference was held in 1989 in the UK where it was decided that the growing organization should operate under the name, "Church of the Nations."³

As the organization grew in the ensuing decade, it came under the supervision of an International Team served by a Presbytery of four men. Besides planting new

³ Tony Fitzgerald, "Church of the Nations," COTN, accessed December 15, 2015, <http://www.cotn.org/>.

churches, established churches were also being added to the family as God opened new nations to them. Towards the end of their second decade it became apparent that what had largely been a network built solely on a commitment to relationships now needed structure, if growth was to continue into their third decade. In October 1999, the International Team convened in London to establish the structure under which the organization now operates. Fitzgerald confides that one of the values COTN holds dear is that of relationships. Thus their philosophy is building from relationship to structure and not from structure to relationships.

During the interview, Fitzgerald shared how his journey to ministry began. He and his wife Marilyn migrated from Australia after having experienced some difficulty in their home church. As he puts it, an Australian church leader had placed a curse over his life. Thus after settling in England he and Marilyn began to connect with people who took them in and fathered them. It was at a conference in 1979 that Fitzgerald was brought up on the stage and words were spoken over him that revealed God's apostolic calling on his life, something Fitzgerald confides he knew nothing about at the time. Yet, to see the man he has become today is to understand how that very calling has shaped his life beyond anything else.

Today the organization continues to flourish under the capable leadership of Tony Fitzgerald and his team. While he is not able to speak in exact terms, by his estimation COTN has easily over a thousand churches within the family, and is still growing. As he puts it, It's a fluid situation. He is a member of the International Coalition of Apostolic Leaders, and also serves alongside Larry Kreider (Dove Ministries) as an independent spiritual advisor, providing oversight to his network.

Fitzgerald's philosophy on partnerships is quite novel. He believes that real unity happens when apostolic fathers find each other and come together with no particular agenda or structure. For him it is about organic relationships being formed by the Spirit among likeminded men. God, he says, placed that principle in COTN from the foundation of their organization. They were to build from relationship to structure, not from structure to relationship. The proof is in the pudding (so to speak) as over the past thirty years they have never encountered a split, and the seven original members are still getting together for fellowship on a yearly basis.

Fitzgerald describes a union of hearts, which he says has kept them together despite major theological and methodological differences. This union of hearts was brought about by a pact that was made in which all agreed that everything but their relationship was negotiable. It is their commitment to that which has kept them together over the years.

While Fitzgerald believes that there should be agreement about the important issues in partnership building, he readily confides that there has to be room for some diversity in perspectives. For him, doctrine and theology are like overlapping circles. At the hub there are the basic core beliefs that we must never compromise. However, as you move closer to the outer rims of the circle, there are many secondary doctrines in which we may differ. The core doctrines serve as a guideline for the kind of speakers COTN allows to speak to their group. However, he agrees that even differing eschatological perspectives are no hindrance to walking in unity with someone. That said, it should be noted that Fitzgerald sees a difference between walking with someone and building with them. As he puts it, "The further we go, the more doctrine matters."

As one whose teaching is primarily about the kingdom of God, Fitzgerald is a major proponent for, what he calls, a “victorious eschatology.”⁴ He made a point of saying that Jesus instructed us to pray, “let thy kingdom come, not “let thy church go.” As a result, he sees attempting to build with those whose expectation of the end is otherwise to be an exercise in futility. Therefore those with whom COTN chooses to build are required to have the same eschatological outlook.

Fitzgerald sees the Western Church as orphans leading orphans. This lack of spiritual fathering coupled with the incident that drove him from Australia as a young man are clearly major drivers for their life’s message, which he describes as “advancing the kingdom through fathers and sons.” More than a message, advancing the kingdom through fathers and sons is one of the core philosophies on which their organization is built. When asked how he has been able to build such a large global network of churches, he attributes what they have been able to accomplish to God’s amazing grace. A few of the principles he outlined are as follows:

- 1) Relationships (feasting together). We are committed to doing life together.
- 2) Prayer (fasting together). We are committed to praying together and for each other.
- 3) We don’t work for the need; we work for the Father; the need will kill us but the Father won’t. Jesus walked past many needs to go to the feast. We, too, must learn to go to the feast even though there may be many needs.
- 4) Do what the Father does, not what the need presses us to do.

⁴ Victorious Eschatology is the view that the kingdom of God will grow and advance until it fills the earth (Dan 2:44-45). The church will rise in maturity, in unity, and in glory before the return of Christ.

When asked about what he sees as obstacles to building unity, the first culprit he identified was pride. By way of unpacking this, he went on to describe an event known as ‘The Gathering,’ where mature leadership comes together with no particular agenda or ostensible leader giving direction. He describes these men as mature leaders who are comfortable “walking with the wind,” his metaphor for following the Spirit. He attributes the success of The Gathering to the humility of these men and laments the fact that such is the exception and not the norm.

At sixty-nine years old, what energizes Fitzgerald is the same thing that has energized him in his work as a bridge builder for over forty years. The thought that the kingdoms of this world will one day become the kingdoms of our God is what motivates him to get up every morning. Today Fitzgerald’s greatest fulfillment comes from seeing those whom he has mentored find success in their calling.

His advice for pastors who feel called to building partnerships is to be patient and allow God to bring those who are spiritual sons into your life—because those whom God gives you are joined to you. It is upon the shoulders of those with whom you have built a solid relationship that you will be able to build what God has called you to build. In essence, we must always begin from relationship and then move to structure. Thus pastors are encouraged to pray and ask God whom he desires to give them to mentor in order to have generational success in what they are called to build.

The author’s interview with Tony Fitzgerald confirmed the following two principles about partnerships:

- 1) Relationships are the foundation of kingdom partnerships. This means that building relationships must be the starting point. We can see how this was true in

Abraham's life. It was due to his relationship with Aner, Eschol, and Mamre that he was able to forge an effective partnership to defeat the five kings (Gen 14).

- 2) We also see the integral role prayer plays in COTN's success as an organization. This is clearly modeled in Paul's relationship with the church at Philippi. Prayer was an integral part of that partnership as it must be in any that we attempt to forge.

Interview with Steve Fedyski

Steve Fedyski is Chief Operating Officer (COO) of Pureflix Entertainment—a position he came into just over a year at the time of the interview. He humorously defines COO as Chief Outreach Officer, since, as he says, “outreach is really what I do.” Prior to that, he was CEO of the Pinnacle Forum for five years, a national leadership forum that focuses on developing and equipping CEOs from the seven major sectors of society and sending them to impact the culture with godly Influence. The mission of Pureflix is to be the world leader in what Fedyski calls faith-based entertainment, through the production and distribution of faith and family media. To their credit, Pureflix has already produced notable films such as *God's Not Dead*, *Do You Believe*, *Woodlawn*, and soon to be released, *God's Not Dead 2*.

In addition to his work with Pureflix, Fedyski has been involved with recruiting and discipling high-level marketplace leaders to be what he calls Navy Seal trained warriors for the cause of Christ for the past twenty-five years. Because he has trained so many key people over the years, he has been able to strategically partner with them to

advance several initiatives. Fedyski describes himself as a unifier and a bridge-builder, something he has been for the better part of his career. Part of what he does is to match professionals who have the same passions.

Pureflix has a strategic alliance division; its function is to go around the country and build partnerships with different entities such as churches and para-church organizations in order to advance their cause. They do this by ascertaining the vision and mission of the organization they wish to partner with, and then using their strength and resources to come alongside them to fulfill it.

Fedyski points out that one of the greatest obstacles to partnership building that he repeatedly encounters is the leader who is “solo in his silo” and who does not understand the power of collaboration. These leaders, he says are working off of their agenda as opposed to God’s agenda. But he finds that taking the subservient role when approaching them works best. Rather than approach them with his agenda, his consistent approach is to first build a relationship and then offer to serve that leader in some way. This involves pointing them to a problem that they can solve together or joining in with them where they are already being effective. To quote Philippians 2:3, we are to “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves.” Fedyski shares how we should have the mind of Christ where we do not push our own agendas, but seek to help and promote that of others.

Fedyski points to three key principles that are foundational to his success as a bridge builder. The first is his devotional life. This starts with daily prayer and continues with an attitude of prayer throughout the course of the day. For him, success is the result of learning to listen to and follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. The second is having a

servant's heart. This means engaging potential partners with the intention of assisting them in solving a problem they might be having. Relationships are more quickly cemented when leaders sense that the person approaching them is not coming with their own agenda. The third principle is leading with love. And for Fedyski, love is all about giving.

Fedyski believes the Church can become more valuable to society by rebuilding trust. According to him, we need to invite more community and business leaders to our events so that they feel as if they are a part of the solution. We need to find problems that most of us can solve together and let them work alongside us to solve them. When the Church does this, the un-churched people within the community are able to see the Church as bringing solutions.

Some of the personal and spiritual benefits Fedyski derives from being a bridge-builder go well beyond the financial success he has enjoyed. He points to the joy and fulfillment he experiences when he gives something back. The first part of his life in the corporate world, he confides, was about the getting. But once he came into the revelation that the earth and everything in it belonged to the Lord (Psalms 24), it brought about a full surrender of both his person and possessions to the Lordship of Christ. From that point forward, nothing he possessed was his, but the Lord's. Life was no longer about getting but giving. It is that very understanding that shapes his whole approach to partnership building. Having known Fedyski for the past two years, the author can personally attest to his willingness to give.

His advice to those who feel called to building partnerships is to: first let God show you what needs to change with you. Before we can build effective partnerships we

need our own motives purified. Then, it is about learning to listen to the Lord. Finally, partnership building means always leading with love. In essence, Fedyski advises leaders to get in for the giving, not for the getting, and things will go well. Ultimately, this is not a numbers game, but it is about how much fruit one is bearing for the Lord.

The author's interview with Steve Fedyski helped him to garner some fresh insights into the world of partnership building from a different perspective. Although a devout Christian, Fedyski is not a pastor or a leader of a religious organization. Though Christian owned and operated, Pureflix is in every sense of the word, a movie production company; by its very nature it must rely upon the partnerships of churches, not only as a way of promoting the release of their films, but also by way of using them as an evangelistic tool. Their willingness to invest in local churches as a way of bridging the relational gap is just one example of their commitment to operating within the confines of Christian principles.

Like Fitzgerald, Fedyski sees building relationships as foundational to effective kingdom partnerships. This is in harmony with what the learning team also discovered from the hexagon exercise.

Interview with Dr. Nathan J. Culver

Dr. Nathan J. Culver is the leader of One Nation Network, a network of pastors and business leaders. The focus of the network is to create relationships with leaders in different regions, whom he refers to as gatekeepers, men who have authority in their regions. Dr. Culver partners with them to hold regional meetings that bring resources that

would be helpful in their region. Those resources can range from marketing skills to help with building their brand, to coaching for those who may need that. The organization also equips five-fold leaders (Eph 4:11-12) to become sharper in their development. As such, Dr. Culver's organization provides theological training, leadership development, and proper use of spiritual gifts, character development and so forth.

Their main focus is to be a team of leaders that work together sharpening each other while bringing unity to the body of Christ. The team comprises of both ministry and business leaders. In his former pastorate in New Jersey, Dr. Culver worked to develop strategic relationships with people and businesses that offered a variety of services. This was done initially to answer the question of what to do about the needs of people when the church was young and had no resources to address those needs. Those needs ranged from food to housing.

In his current role as a network leader Dr. Culver encourages other pastors to follow the same pattern of forming strategic partnerships within their city and region. These strategic partnerships help to strengthen the ministry of the Church. They meet the needs of the people while providing opportunities for the Church to interact with key people within the city.

Dr. Culver identifies some of his challenges in building partnerships. He finds that pastors are generally receptive to the idea of building partnerships. But most people are busy building their own ministry and need to be shown how coming together in unity can help to enhance their ministry. Another challenge he identifies is the lack of trust pastors have for one another due to abuse and rejection. He talks about the need to build trust and described briefly how he goes about building that trust with pastors.

Any success he has attained as a bridge-builder is attributed to his commitment to building authentic relationships. Too often our approach to relationship building is less than authentic, driven more by the desire to advance our own agenda. Dr. Culver believes that when we become opportunistic we are no longer genuine. Like Tony Fitzgerald and Steve Fedyski, everything starts with relationships.

Dr. Culver believes the Church can become an institution of value to its community and world by simply getting involved in the community. The church, he says, is a community. If it is not involved in its community, it is not a genuine church. The Church must get back to loving people—loving them like Jesus by giving to them. He believes it is the Church's lack of involvement in the community that has led to the current state wherein people have lost faith in its presence. We have to take our cues from Jesus.

Dr. Culver does not believe in making doctrine an issue in building partnerships. He points to how Jesus would approach people and build relationships first. In the case of Nicodemus, it was only after establishing a rapport with him that he was then able to teach him the truth about God. Thus when we have genuine relationships with people there is room within that relationship for discovery through dialogue that also fosters mutual appreciation.

Where mutual appreciation and respect are present, those in partnership are able to influence each other's perspectives. He believes that having this kind of openness is the only way to approach building relationships with people that can lead to partnerships. We must be open to learning from one another. However, it is important to point out that like Tony Fitzgerald, Dr. Culver also sees a difference between walking with a Christian

leader in unity and building a partnership with them.

Dr. Culver's advice to those seeking to build partnerships is to begin by building solid relationships. Once the foundation of relationships is established, the next step is to identify a common cause that everyone can agree on. Then, go prayerfully forward as a team. Although teams commonly disband once their objective is achieved, Dr. Culver believes in staying connected and doing life together.

The data gathered by the learning team, and that which came from the semi-structured interviews, proved quite useful to the focus of this thesis-project. It has affirmed the importance of relationships as a key factor in fostering a culture of unity and cooperation among churches. This thesis-project advances the idea that every pastor should receive the words of the apostle Paul as a personal charge, and embrace the task of fostering unity as an essential ministry responsibility.

CHAPTER FIVE

Results, Evaluation, and Conclusion

In this section the author summarizes the outcomes and implications of the learning process explored in the previous chapters. In particular, the author will look at three specific areas in which his learning has been impacted, and show how this learning will inform his ministry practice going forward. Afterwards the author will offer some recommendations for those who discern a similar calling into the ministry of bridge building.

This thesis-project set out to find answers to the question: How can a culture of unity and cooperation among churches be fostered from which partnerships can be formed in transforming our city? It naturally began with some assumptions in mind as to how this could happen. Some of those assumptions were confirmed and others were challenged and brought into alignment. As the process moved on, the author quickly discovered there were other themes that relate to the subject of this thesis-project, each of which by itself could probably have been a whole and separate project. No doubt some further exploration of these themes will be undertaken in the near future in order to broaden the author's expertise as a bridge builder.

The literature review was critical in providing insights from writers who have explored those themes more deeply, and also in enhancing the author's ability to better articulate the ideas and concepts held within his subconscious and that the author even began to implement in his ministry. In particular, John Armstrong's in *Your Church is*

Too Small: Why Unity in Christ's Mission is Vital to the Future proposal that individuals should pursue a relational unity was most helpful in guiding the author forward in his pursuits as a bridge builder. Relational unity with Christ, he said, "should lead us to embrace a co-operational unity with other Christians... cooperation is not the same as compromise."¹ The way in which he unpacks and relates it to the Godhead coheres with some of the author's own thoughts on the collaborative nature of the Trinity. Relational unity is clearly a unity being produced by the Holy Spirit, and one that holds better promise for pastors seeking to forge partnerships. The following are the three salient ways in which this journey has impacted the author's life.

First, the process confirmed that relationship building is the major key in the whole enterprise of church partnerships. By relationships, the author is referring to those built on trust. This would imply that there is openness that allows those within the relationship to know each other beyond mere formalities. A genuine sense of caring for one another must also be keenly felt, to the extent that those in partnership are ready to share their resources. Thankfully, these elements are present within the group of pastors the author meets with each month. Therefore, we as pastors are challenged to find ways of enhancing this as we go forward.

Second, there is a need for leaders to discover and pursue a common cause. While the author may have suspected that after seven years his group might just need to parlay those relationships into some purposeful pursuits, this idea has yet to be approached. Perhaps the feeling of not wanting to place a strain on those relationships has kept him

¹ Armstrong, *Your church is too Small*, 55

from moving towards what he now sees as the next logical step. Previously the group's main focus was unity for the sake of unity. However, this process has evolved the author's thinking to where it must become unity for the sake of purpose. The existence of strong relationships among leaders is a treasure trove of untapped potential that can only be realized when leveraged towards worthy pursuits. In actuality, those relationships only deepen as the team experiences accomplishments together, leading to even greater pursuits. With this in mind, it is safe to say that the next phase of our existence as a group will involve more strategic partnering and pursuing of specific goals in the area of social change. To do any less would be to waste the precious potential that the group possesses, and rob the community of heaven's blessings.

The third is the discovery of the author's own life's message through this process. This project was undertaken with the intention of gaining some expertise in an area of ministry that the author had been involved with for the past decade. On this, his expectations were met. However, an unintended positive consequence of taking this journey is that the author has come to identify what he believe is his life's message. It was during Dr. Nathan Culver's interview that the seed thought was planted in his heart. Culver mentioned that, "Every preacher has to have a wide range of themes from which to preach and teach his congregation. But there is a singular theme that is his whole life. This is the contribution he or she will make to the broader body of Christ, and the one for which he or she will be remembered - their life's message."² As the author reflects upon his life and the journey this thesis-project has been, he now sees that his is to be a bridge

² Nathan J. Culver, One Nation Network.

builder in the body of Christ. This is the only work the author can say with certainty that he will still be engaged with beyond his tenure as a pastor. Quite possibly more books will be written around this and other related themes whose impact will hopefully far reaching.

It remains to be seen whether pastors are willing to pay the price to build the kind of relationships previously described. The harsh reality is that the obstacles to unity are many. The economic and racial homogeneity of churches still stands as one of those hurdles yet to be crossed. Sadly, white, black, and brown churches remain remarkably homogeneous in regards to ethnicity, even with the demographics of the community changing around them. According to sociologists Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, in the book *Divided by Faith*, “about 90 percent of American congregations are made up of at least 90 percent of people of the same race.”³

This means that poor and rich and black, white and brown churches (i.e., urban and suburban churches) for the most part, do not have an ethnic mix - not unless pastors are willing to take the lead and bridge that gap. The risk/reward mindset often dismisses the validity of partnering with other churches, because too often the risks appear to outweigh any reward. However, as we have seen, when the church is united, the church is unstoppable. On this note, the author is reminded of an often-repeated saying from Bill Hybels: “The church is still the only hope for the world, provided that it’s working right.”

Another issue the research uncovered was the need for leaders to think systemically—particularly when it comes to the process related to relationship building.

³ Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 135-36.

Relationships require time and the investment of one's self. However, more often than not, they are worth the effort. A small investment of one's time - perhaps sharing a meal with someone - can go a long way towards breaking down walls of distrust and dispelling preconceived notions that keep leaders apart. The traveling salesman's motto: make a friend today, make a deal tomorrow, is certainly apropos in this regard. Friendship is the basis for everything good that follows.

A systemic understanding of relationship building recognizes the power of small sacrifices, such as the gift of taking time to attend an event in support of a colleague, or just being present during a time of crisis. These actions may not yield fruit immediately, but as any seed planted in good soil is bound to produce, if we learn to trust the process. As Abraham's example has shown, covenant relationships can lead to powerful alliances, which in turn, overcomes insurmountable odds (Gen 14). It is certain one risks rejection in order to build relationships. However, those who understand the biblical mandate regarding unity and who sees the blessing it can bring to the community at large must be willing to take that risk.

Recommendations

An important question put forth in this thesis was: How can the church show itself to be of value to the world? And it was put forth in light of the present climate in which the church finds itself increasingly maligned and lampooned by the world. Therefore, for this author, this is really the crux of the matter. The idea of restoring the respect

individuals once had for the church is as much of a driving force as anything else behind this thesis-project. Based on what the research has yielded, the author will leave the following recommendations for practitioners:

Take Ownership of your Community

Practitioners should assume ownership and responsibility for their communities and begin to work for its betterment. God's promised blessings for his church are inextricably tied to the investment the church is willing to make in seeking the peace and prosperity of the city. Without outlining any specific benefits, the author will simply put forth some theology, which hopefully will serve as a motivation; here is an example: "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." (Jer 29:7)

The welfare of captive Israel then was tied to the welfare of the city of Babylon for as long as they were there. This was not by coincidence, but by design. And, what was true for exiled Israel then is certainly true for the church today. The promise of blessing is inextricably connected to our commitment to seeking the peace of the cities and communities where God has planted us. However, we should not find this strange.

Seeking the peace of the city is rooted in the same principle that Jesus taught His disciples. As disciples we are instructed to pray that God's will be done and that His kingdom will come "on earth as it is in heaven." (Matt 6:10) In essence, we are to desire that the order and beauty of heaven would invade the ugliness of where we are, bringing

with it heaven's justice, liberty and peace. And the author would add, not only are we to pray for this, but also to work through partnerships with this end in mind.

This is the way God has designed it, and it is high time that the whole church gets this truth. A major force of resistance to the idea of taking ownership is the escapist mentality that pervades the church. Those victimized by this mindset are consumed with being raptured from this world; they place efforts to work for social and cultural transformation on the same level as polishing the brass on a sinking ship. Thus, the only legitimate priority is to rescue a few souls before the ship goes down.

Another force of resistance is what the author would call, "the Goshen mentality." (Gen 45:10) Many Christians seem to think they are completely insulated from what happens around them. It is true that God mercifully spared the Hebrews who dwelled in Goshen when he sent the plagues upon Egypt. However, in the case of the Israelites in Babylon, they were not exempt, and neither is the church. As the prophet Jeremiah prophesied, we are to "pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper" (29:7).

Jeremiah's word to captive Israel is instructive for the church today, because what was true for them is also true for us. Whatever the conditions are within our communities, their effects will either be enjoyed or endured by all who dwell there. It just so happens that God has staked the betterment of our communities on the abiding presence of the church. Like Israel, the church must shed the escapist mentality and settle down with occupation in mind. We are to fully participate in life as citizens of the kingdom of God, but with the understanding that His kingdom has no boundaries. This world belongs to Him, and the Redeemer's mission and our destiny is as much towards redeeming culture,

as it is to redeem lost souls. Our shared hope of Christ's return should in no way override the mandate to occupy until He returns.

James Davidson Hunter in his book *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* briefly outlines what the author believes is the mandate to occupy until Christ returns could look like when he stated that, "People fulfill their individual and collective destiny in the art, music, literature, commerce, law, and scholarship they cultivate, the relationships they build, and in the institutions they develop - the families, churches and associations and communities they live in and sustain - as they reflect the good of God and His design for flourishing."⁴ This effectively spells out God's intention for his people.

In the same spirit that God sent his prophet (Jeremiah) to remind Israel that their captivity in Babylon was His divine plan, and wherein He called them to invest themselves and their futures in that city, may the church also hear and be motivated to seek the peace of the city where God has placed it.

Rediscover Love

Jesus was clear that the credibility of our witness hinged on our ability to dwell in a harmonious state wherein our love for each other was unquestioned. The night before he was crucified, he issued the commandment to love one another, punctuated by the statement: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another"

⁴ James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3-4.

(John 14:34-35). Thus, the church needs to rediscover love. This is not to suggest that the church as an institution is un-loving. On the contrary, the church is very quick to respond to crisis and to come to the aid of hurting people all over the world. However, our struggles with unity is an indication that we still have some ground to cover when it comes to loving each other.

As stated in chapter two, nothing brings greater credibility to gospel than unity (John 17:21). However, there can be no unity unless we are prepared to take seriously Jesus' most important commandment to love one another (John 13:34-35). The call to unity is a call to love one another (Eph 4:1-3). As Christians this is something we all know—at least in theory. However, if we are honest, we must admit that we are guilty of investing a disproportionate amount of energy into other things—things we believe makes us credible—such as the demonstration of power and control. Power is absolutely necessary for effective ministry to those who are bound and oppressed (Matt 10:7-8; Acts 1:8). And the kingdom of God is certainly more than mere words (1Cor 2:1-5). But with that said, love is still the mark of the Christian faith. Consequently, we need to invest time and energy into fulfilling Christ's command to love one another. It is by no coincidence that the famous love chapter (1 Cor 13), occurs in the middle of Paul's teaching on the diversity of the body and the proper use of spiritual gifts. Like the believers in Corinth, we somehow seem to think that demonstrations of power are the only legitimate claims we have to authenticity. However, lest we forget the words of the apostle Paul which states:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move

mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. (1 Co 13:1–3)

As a motivation towards bridge building, we should consider the synergistic effect of unity. As shown in chapter two, it is through unity, harmony and brotherly love that we demonstrate God’s love for the world we are trying to reach. When properly demonstrated, this love becomes an irresistible attraction to the world. Thus making evangelism easier than when we work solo in our silos.

Re-educate Tomorrow’s Leaders

Finally, we need to re-educate tomorrow’s leaders. By this the author simply means that we should place fresh emphasis on equipping ministers to maintain the unity of the spirit. While Paul’s charge to “maintain the unity of the Spirit” (Eph 4:3) may have been initially directed towards Christians in general, it is the author’s conviction that it bears special relevance to pastors and those in church leadership. If there is any truth to the old adage, “as go the prophet, so goes the people” then the idea that fostering unity can be left to the average churchgoer is ludicrous. Generally speaking, churchgoers tend to fall in line with whatever is their church interest. And if senior pastors and ministry leaders are not engaged in the work of fostering unity beyond their congregation, there is little chance that the individual members will even care about it. And thus, it falls upon the shoulders of those in leadership to lead the way.

Paul admonishes us to “walk worthy of our calling.” (Eph 4:1) Who better understands the implications of a calling than those in the five-fold ministry (Eph 4:11-12)? Every ordained person accepts that they have been called to that office for which

they have been ordained. With this in mind, the author believes it should become a practice to charge every ordained leader in the church according to Paul's words. It seems that if pastors were charged with this responsibility from the onset in much the same way they are charged with leading their congregations, the idea of unity and cooperation among churches would hardly be seen as optional. Rather, it would be embraced as an integral part of their calling to ministry.

Everyone who embraces ministry as a vocation should be educated on the importance of being actively engaged in bridge building and partnering. It is a part of walking worthy of our calling. But perhaps more pastors would be able to walk worthy if they were trained in how to do so. Therefore, the author would also recommend that seminaries, universities, and Bible schools develop courses to equip students on how to be bridge builders. More courses should be taught on the importance and methodology of partnership building along with the other areas of social engagement.

Some would argue that the Church Jesus left behind (though a microcosm of today's church) was more representative of the Church he desires to see in the earth. The purist would even argue that not only have we left our first love, but that we have departed all together from the principles that made the early church (Acts 2:42-47) strong. Whether one agrees entirely or in part, the church certainly has significant work to do in the area of unity and cooperation. Jay Forrester in his article "Learning Through System Dynamics as Preparation for the 21st Century" talks about "the drift towards low performance"⁵—that is the idea that most of us can start with enthusiasm but then

⁵ Jay Forrester, "Learning through System Dynamics as Preparation for the 21st Century" *Sloan Management Review* 35 no. 4 (June 1994): 17-18.

discover we lack the motivation to carry us beyond our initial commitment. This may well apply to the church where fostering unity is concerned. The level of harmony and cooperation that is evident in the Church today may have drifted somewhat from that seen in the early church. (Acts 2:1; 42-47; 4:32-37)

The need for a more proactive approach here cannot be overstated. Energy must be intentionally applied towards reversing the current trend in which competition, enmity, and disunity are the norm. Re-educating leaders is one way of reversing this trend.

The way forward is fraught with many challenges, but we are closer to unity than can be perceived. Yes, there are so many walls between us. But the author is encouraged by John Armstrong's words in, *Your Church is Too Small: Why Unity in Christ's Mission is Vital to the Future* when he states that, "the church is coming together in new expressions of unity and diversity. This is happening through the work of the Holy Spirit...This new expression is shaped by mission and ecumenism."⁶

The author is strongly convinced, despite the present atmosphere, that Jesus has already provided us with everything necessary to attain our objectives. Whatever unity looks like to an individual, Jesus sees unity as possible. What we must do then is align our understanding and vision of unity with His. Once we begin seeing the same picture that our Lord sees—essentially a shared vision—we will be moving in the right direction.

⁶ Armstrong, *Your Church is Too Small*, 52.

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VITA

The author of this work is REFORD MOTT, born January 16, 1961 in St. Ann's Parish, Jamaica WI. On February 5, 1974 he migrated to the United States where he lived in the Bronx, New York, and where he continued his educational journey in the public school system from middle school through high school. His conversion to Christianity came in November 1980 at The Tabernacle of Prayer Church in Queens, New York, under the leadership of Apostle Johnnie Washington.

Reford entered Alliance Theological Seminary, located in Nyack, New York, in the fall of 2001 as a one of the five percent of ministry practitioners qualified through life experience to study at the graduate level, graduating with a master's degree in urban ministry.

In 1994, he entered public ministry after planting a church in his home with his family and a few friends. That small Bible study has since blossomed into what is now Family Christian Center; a vibrant congregation nestled in the heart of the City of New Rochelle. His ministry journey has led him into missions' work and church-planting initiatives in both Africa and the Middle East. He was consecrated as a Bishop in August of 2012 and serves as overseer to several churches in the USA and abroad.

Reford also serves on the apostolic council of the United States Coalition of Apostolic Leaders (USCAL), the North American Arm of the International Council of Apostolic Leaders (ICAL), and is also the New York State Convener of The Remnant, a national network of pastors and Christian leaders whose focus is to restore integrity to leaders in every sphere of American society.

The need to see both revival and social transformation has recently led him to form One City One Church (OCOC), a coalition of pastors in the city of New Rochelle whose purpose is to work and pray for the peace of the city. This project stems from the desire to increase effectiveness in this critical area of partnership building, as that has become one of the main occupations of his ministry. This thesis-project is presented in partial fulfillment for the requirements of the Doctor of Ministry degree from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Boston, Massachusetts. The expected graduation is May 2016.

Reford lives with his family in the city of New Rochelle, New York. He has been married to Sherrie for twenty-eight years. Together they are the proud parents of five children, and are grandparents to eight grandchildren. He continues to serve as the Senior Pastor at Family Christian Center in New Rochelle.